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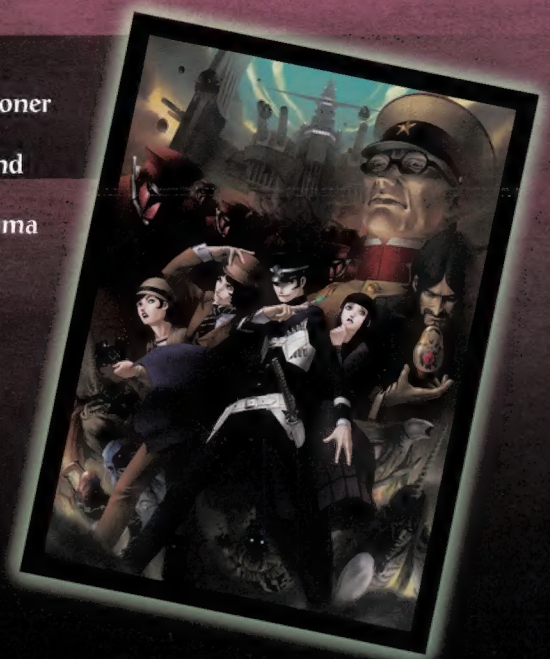

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Blood
Sexual Themes
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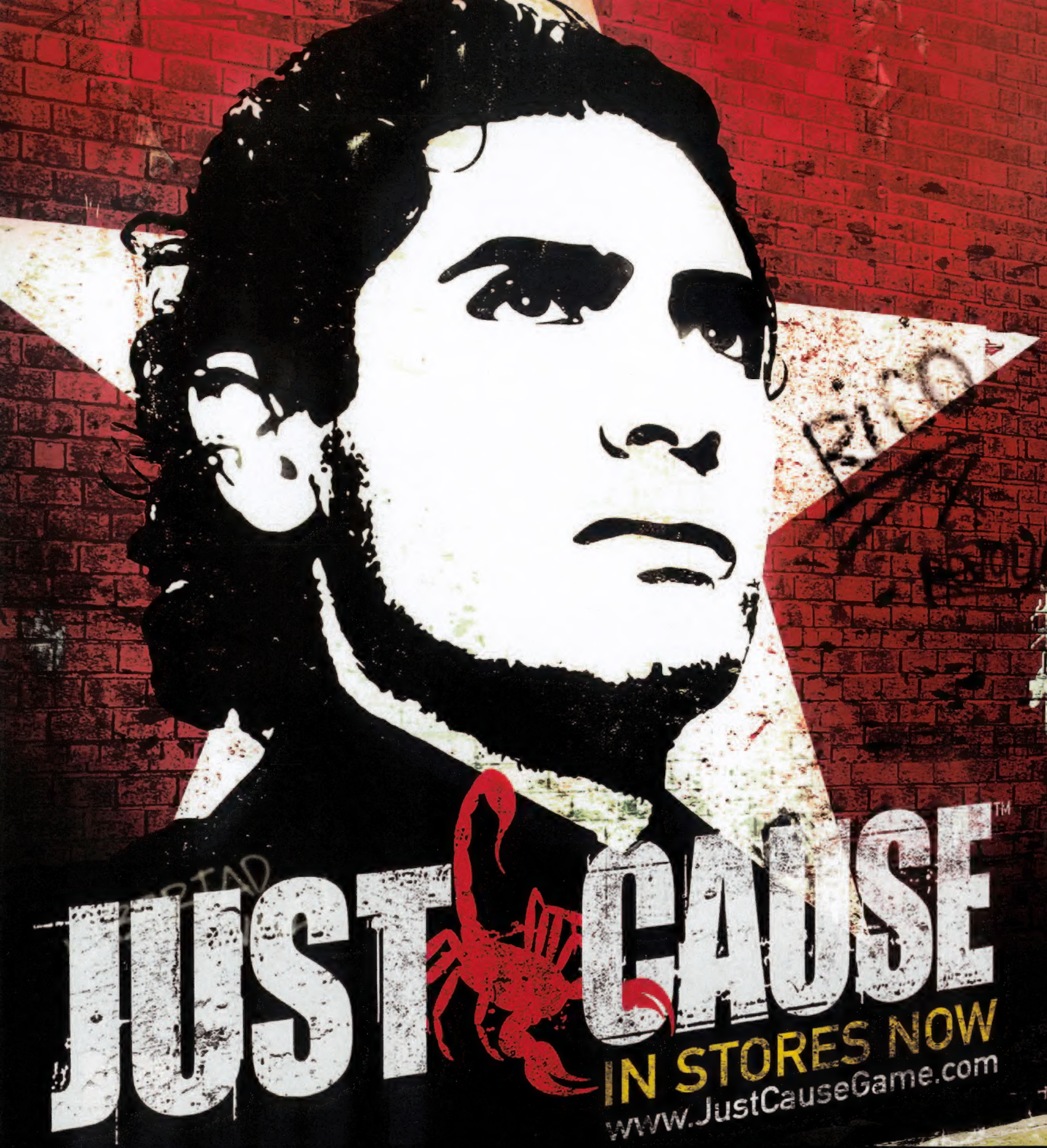

MATURE 17+
M
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Blood
Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Language
Sexual Themes

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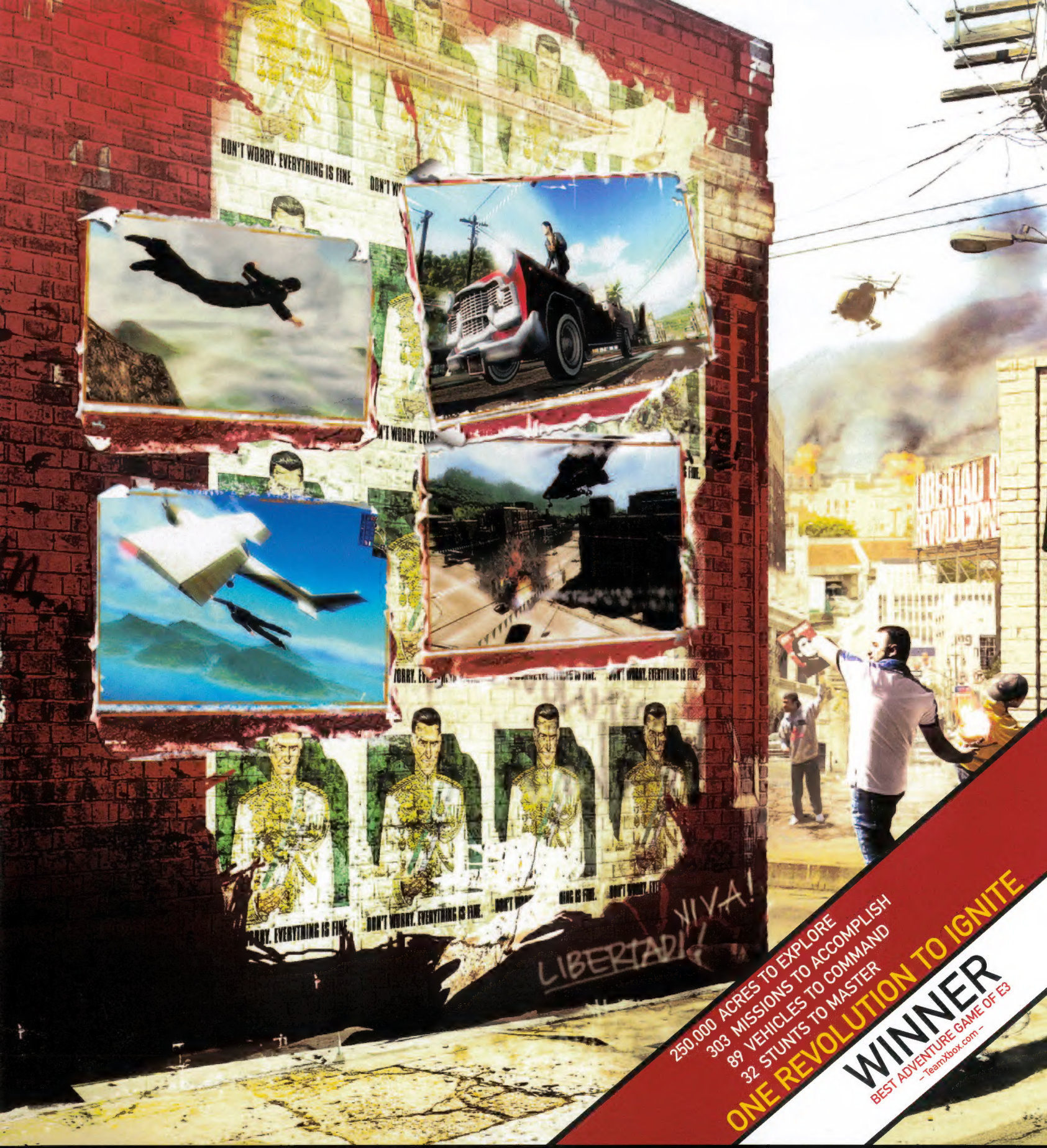

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eidos

Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

Distant early warning

By next issue we will have integrated the PS3 into our workplace and just over a month later the first few million of you will have taken one home. So now that it's here what does the PS3 really represent? The once-deafening buzz echoing from E3 2005—overshadowed by the $600 hush that fell over the crowd in '06—having dissipated, it's finally go time. Everyone knows where I stand on PS3 (first in line), so let me play devil's advocate for a change.

It wasn't long ago that Sony had its MD Walkman—the company's stab at the massive iPod and music market—handed back to them with a big "no thank you" due to the fact that they wouldn't have anything to do with the MP3 format, opting instead for their own Atrac3.

As huge a lead Sony has amassed in the video games business, the electronics division has only turned a profit in one out of the last five years. The PS3 in many ways is its last hope. If the system tanks we could very well be headed towards another two console market – two very different consoles at that. Yeah right, right? Let's size it up. Like a PC, the PS3 surfs the net, plays online games, and features one of the coolest music stores anyone has ever seen. It also serves up Blu-ray movies on a platter and is a technical marvel (albeit expensive and years away from being tapped). Although untested, the core of the PS3 is akin to the super computers of the '90s, a technology that may one day revolutionize home electronics. In the meantime there's that price. With Sony and Toshiba still at odds over which will be the dominant format (even though Blu-ray looked like a sure thing), the Blu-ray factor is fledgling. Could Sony's move to control the multibillion-dollar market of next-generation video discs come back to haunt them? Let's hope not.

As pathetic as this may seem (and I apologize in advance to everyone that thinks all these bells and whistles are cool), I really only care about the games app. I don't see any $600 console ever penetrating US households on a massive scale. That said I don't know anybody who's not ready, willing, and able to drop $600 for the games application alone. But we are in the minority.

I think Sony would have been better off with a scaled-down PS3 that just plays games along with a traditional, mid-priced player for the family to watch discs, download music, and surf the net. Most people can already do that anyway. Leave gaming to the gamers. For my money, online games belong on high-powered PCs—World of Warcraft seems to be doing okay—especially with Live Arcade and GameTap already out there. And as far as online content goes, I only see it eroding the fabric of game creation. I don't need to swap skins with Charlie down the street, or linger around waiting for a new map; make me a great game.

Sony definitely sipped some of Microsoft's Kool-Aid, only Microsoft's cash reserves are immense compared to Sony's coffers, reportedly to the tune of 38 billion to 6 billion. And with experts forecasting that the PS3 could lose as much as 2 billion by the end of the fiscal year … not so tasty. And then there's the industry itself. Look at all of these ports! Sony will have to live or die based on exclusive content, and Microsoft isn't exactly hurting in that department. Meanwhile Nintendo is up in the bleachers selling Wiis to the band…*with* their brands.

I've grown up with Sony…from my first Walkman to the WEGA on my wall to the VAIO I'm typing this on, they've always stood for style and quality. I can't imagine a home electronics or, especially, game landscape without them. It's a shame they're so bullish on going against the grain. If the only race they had to win was video games, at least the playing field would be level, but carrying the weight of the empire on its back, the games division can't afford to miss a beat. Bottom line: Die-hard gamers will suck up every PS3 that launches; from there I guess we just sit back and watch the show. It was a lot less stressful worrying about slowdown and flicker.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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PLAY™ (ISSN 1537-7539) is published monthly by Fusion Publishing, Inc., 29229 Canwood St., Suite 200, Agoura Hills, CA 91301. Volume 5, Issue 10. Single issue rates: $5.99, yearly newsstand value: $71.88. The one year (12 issue) subscription rate is $19.99 in the U.S., $44.99 in Canada, and $64.99 in all other foreign locales. Checks must be made payable in U.S. currency only to PLAY. Send address changes to: P.O. BOX 16567, North Hollywood, CA 91615-9684 or email play@espcomp.com For subscription service questions, call (800)694-6506. We periodically make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please write to us and include a copy of your mailing label. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue, as well as for any subscription changes to take place on any existing subscription. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials; all unsolicited material becomes the property of Fusion Publishing, Inc. Without limiting the rights of copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Fusion publishing, Inc. To reuse any material in this publication, obtain a permission request form by contacting Fusion Publishing, Inc. at (818)707-7786 [phone] or (818)707-7212 [fax].

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The Darkness
An original cover by Marc Silvestri

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Suggestive Themes
Violence
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playback

October 2006

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Kicking the corpse

I'm sure by now you've heard the news that E3, the obnoxious orgy of light, sound, and body odor is being laid to rest. In its place, it seems one of two new models will rise - one possibility being a smaller, sleeker, more professional E3 intended for dedicated videogame media and developers ONLY (sorry bloggers, gamestore clerks, and NBC interns), and the other, a model in which each publisher puts together its own private show for a similar group of press, to ensure maximum media coverage for their dollar.

As someone that has been to the last two E3s, writing for a fairly large fan-site that routinely gains access to behind-closed-doors showings, I can certainly say that as far as I'm concerned, the bloated beast I've come to know as gaming's biggest yearly event will not be missed. Meeting with and picking the brains of the talented men and women that put these wonderful experiences together behind the scenes in a small, quiet, and (god-willing) air-conditioned environment is a far more captivating experience than playing a game on the show floor, with masses of fanatics clamoring for their turn behind you. Games are meant to immerse and engross, neither of which is particularly easy (if possible at all) on the show floor. How are members of the press (of which I do not formally consider myself at this juncture) to come to appreciate the finer points of projects in development and report their analysis and reactions to the game, when they can't lose themselves in the experience for 30 seconds before being nudged by some reject brandishing an 'exhibit only' badge to give up the controller?

I know the fans that love bantering back and forth across message boards will surely miss the opportunity to argue over which hardware vendor 'won' E3 (if a more abstract and meaningless achievement has ever existed, I haven't heard of it), but surely the developers whose games fall through the cracks of the media coverage in the wake of the most hyped announcements won't be shedding too many tears for the loss. I firmly believe that no individual signs on to a project with a goal of achieving mediocrity (or worse), and as such, I assume that every piece of work at E3 is an example of hours of blood sweat and tears. The more the industry can do to shed light evenly on all of them, the better. I look forward to perhaps meeting some of the PLAY crew next year at a smaller, more professional event. Until then, keep up the good work, and keep giving coverage to all the wonderful games that most of the other mags keep managing to overlook (Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom, anyone?).

Sascha Lichtenstein

...And furthermore...

At this very moment, there are people who are anticipating another "Great Video Gaming Crash" as was seen over twenty years ago. Why? Hop into your high chairs for this one - E3 has evaporated into a smaller, more intimate and low key July event.

The world of video games is kaput.

Seriously, people believe this empty thought to hold actual truth. Yes, E3 is the foremost day of the year for gaming, where the greatest developers in the world reveal their secrets, their systems, and the future of our obsession. Yes, they also plan year round to put their content together for display, as E3 is the zaniest and most watched spectacle in the industry. No, this evolution of E3 will simply not derail what has developed into one of the largest and most successful forms of entertainment in the world. Things are going to change, but the fervor of the people for video games is not even close to being one of them.

E3 in recent years has clearly become a controlled riot, and too much too handle. In almost every respect, game makers, the media, and the millions who look to this event for news are getting screwed, increasingly so every year. Six to ten years ago, E3 was an *easy* way for developers to showcase their product and for the media and likewise the fans, to see what was on the horizon. I can recall almost every game on display at E3 2000, from the "Showstoppers" like *Jet Grind Radio, Shenmue,* and *MGS2,* to the trash like *The Grinch* and *Evergrace*. Media coverage was phenomenal (practically full image listings in GR; good one guys) and it was a simple task for the rest of the world to get the complete idea of the event. Each following year, E3 inarguably grew more convoluted. Media outlets were forced to be much more selective in showing the titles on display, resulting in the "Showstoppers" and sequels stealing most of the coverage while here and there, a unique and overshadowed gem would slip in.

If I had been the casual observer this past E3, I could tell you the heavy hitters, and no others.

Where else was this heading? To a disaster for the industry. Used gaming sales and sequel buying habits already scare developers into continuing traditional ideas and proven IP's, but for the unique and daring titles to not get so much as a glance thanks to the sheer number of titles and maze of wonderment on the E3 show floor, why would any developer decide on something unique or original? To top it off, the scene stealing powerhouse games often have large publishers or are first party, meaning they'll be the ones on display at the console manufacturer's individual showings and will have plenty of marketing support. Those already infrequent original titles that try something different are typically from smaller, less capable publishers, and rely on E3 to be their display case (save for maybe a one paragraph review they might score a month after release). *Oddworld: Stranger, Chaos Field, Blood Will Tell, Tokobot*...all games that got sat on - the list is absurdly long these days. Even the unique games that *do* have a large publisher, like *Odama*, get lost in the crowd; that title was gypped of both previews and reviews, even after two years in the "public eye".

This year and those of recent have proven to be the most difficult for the daring developer. In each gaming magazine covering the 2006 E3 Expo, I saw hidden under the "showstoppers", a few titles not shown in any other mag. This means that the average reader is unlikely to see most of the titles presented by the media, let alone the ones left uncovered universally. E3 simply doesn't work as it should anymore. No one is able to keep up with everything, and it's leading developers to not only steer away from originality, but often forcing them to rush a demo of game in May or June that's not even meant for playing until the fall. This can mean early bad publicity for titles that are likely not so bad. *Red Steel* and *Too Human* were scorned by some this year, *Dead Rising* last year, *Skullmonkeys, Strider 2,* and countless others in the past. The continuation of the current E3 would help lead the gaming industry to the sequel churning, high budget hell that it was already teetering on. As I said, E3 simply does not work as it should anymore.

> **"If I had been the casual observer this past E3, I could tell you the heavy hitters, and no others."**

Oh, yes, this new E3 should *destroy* the industry. Heaven forbid we give developers *more time* to polish their titles, a *more distinctive setting* to showcase their product, and *induce more showings* other than E3 itself. Yes, fewer guests will be able to attend, but how many were needed anyway? Do you think that because media outlets will be able to send fewer representatives that the rest of the world will be less enthusiastic to see what secrets were uncovered? Reporters won't have to spend 3/4ths of their time waiting in line, each should be able to get around to more titles overall, will get a quieter setting to see and demo them, and will have a more direct interaction with the developer to learn about the game and where it's at in development. Sure, you could speculate that fewer titles will be showcased privately, but I'd argue that this will only increase 3rd party ties to 1st party companies, and prohibit a more selectively chosen lineup. This would save the unshown titles for the events that the already seen ones won't need so much to occupy. I needn't even go into how many more titles will be revealed at different points throughout the year, rather being the flurry of announcements that typically occur at once. Original titles and media coverage should *thrive* as a result of this new E3; others think "The Great Crash" will soon be upon us.

Well, that's my assault on the rest of the community.
Thanks for reading.

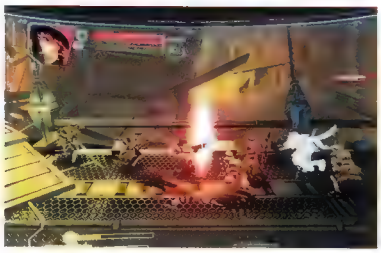
SegaVega

P.S. A good number of those "forgotten" games get **play** covers

ink

From Russia with love

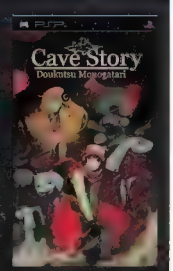
The Red Star to finally shine



After two years on the shelf, gamers will finally be seeing red this Fall. Yes, The Red Star has finally found a home. The gorgeous action shooter, based on the Archangel Studios Graphic Novel Series www.archangel-studios.com(www.archangel-studios.com) set in an alternate reality Russia would have been among Acclaim's best games ever had it not got caught up in the company's tumultuous decline and eventual crash. XS Games will be doing the honors this Fall, however, as of press time only the PS2 version had the green flag; understandable with the Xbox market cold as a borscht.

Wii've had it!

Cave sweet cave

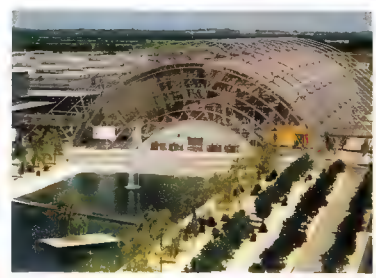


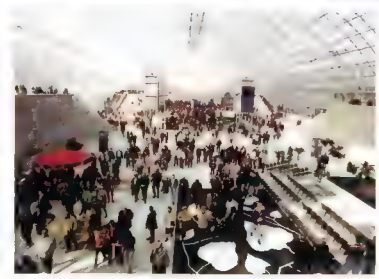
If you haven't heard of Cave Story yet, that's okay. You will soon. An independent Japanese freeware PC game created by the artist known as Pixel, Cave Story is an astoundingly polished and refined action/adventure game that has been picked up by Variant Interactive for distribution on the PSP.

According to Christopher W. Boyer, CEO of Variant, the game is still in development, and won't be available until both Pixel and Sony approve of the build. But you don't have to wait that long; to get a shot at this melancholy, soulful title, point your browsers at http://hp.vector.co.jp/authors/VA022293/storehouse.html for the original Japanese release, or http://agtp.romhack.net for Aeon Genesis's English translation of the sweet, sad, and unforgettable "Doukutsu Monogotari."

Augustfest

GC 2006 posts record attendance





Held at the Leipzig Fair exhibition centre in Germany, GC 2006 closed on Sunday evening with a record number of visitors. Over the four-day event (Aug. 23-27) 183,000 people (compared to 134,000 in 2005) journeyed to the fifth-annual convention. With E3 and ECTS in decline, GC seems like the shape of game cons to come, although we're hard pressed to find anything to "report" on that our readers don't already know. Still, visitors were plentiful; Project Director Angela Schierholz touts "The larger displays put together by exhibitors for older visitors and the female target group as well as the expansion of GC family and the new section GC Art have resulted in more visitors from different generations. GC has hence met one of its key aims by showing that interactive entertainment and education are relevant for society as a whole." Not "E3" but it certainly seems a more consumer-oriented approach. Could gaming's premiere annual event end up in Germany? From the looks of it, sure beats the heck out of LA.

Charts INTERNATIONAL

August ending Japan Top 5

01	New Super Mario Bros.
02	Tamagotchi Connection: Corner Shop 2
03	Shaberu! DS Oryouri Navi
04	Kahashima Ryuuta Kyouju Kanshuu...
05	Animal Crossing: Wild World

August ending (ELSPA) UK Top 5

01	CARS
02	New Super Mario Bros.
03	The Sims 2
04	Animal Crossing Wild World
05	Monster House

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August 2006

Cars
THQ/Xbox, PS2, Wii, Xbox 360

The delightful spirit and personality of the film make its way into this open game world of wild racing.

Ninety-Nine Nights
Microsoft/Xbox 360

Visceral action and tactics explode in this much anticipated (and well worth the wait) 360 stunner.

GTA: Liberty City Stories
Rockstar / PS2

Jacking cars and wreaking have across the city... The series that just keeps on going and going...

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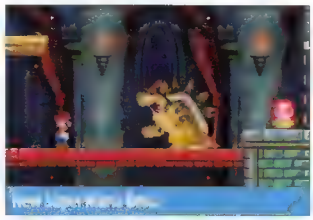

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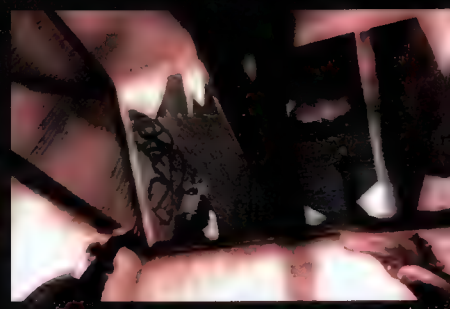
system(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Starbreeze	Available	2007



THE DARKNESS

If you're not afraid of it, you will be

words Brady Fiechter

When directly asked how The Darkness is coming along, lead designer Jens Andersson doesn't say a word. But the coy smile on his face says everything: yes, the Darkness is coming along quite brilliantly, thank you very much.

As the humble leader of the exceptionally talented group of Swedes known as Starbreeze, Andersson is following up the gritty sci-fi triumph The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay with another first-person experience—a little less adventure this time, a little more action—poised to stand as a giant of technical and artistic mastery. But whatever the team's confidence that everything they've learned from Riddick can be embellished for a more assured, engaging experience, they're strapped in for a long and important several months of development before the final verdict is settled.

In the mean time, Andersson, programmer Jakob Ericsson and concept artist Mattias Snygg are locked away in a small private booth, far, far away from the comfort of their workspace in Uppsala, caged in by the eager throng of Comic Con showgoers waiting to get the first public sneak-peak at The Darkness.

The team expresses how much fun they're having showing off their creation, but that fun is about to switch to vulnerable scrutiny. The Darkness is being handed over to an outside influence for the first time, levels that aren't quite ready to be revealed are being revealed, and as I'm given the controls, the tension in the room gets me even more excited; these guys are a little nervous, and they have no qualms admitting it. The Darkness is about to be put to the test.

I come away from my time with The Darkness matching Andersson's smile. Starbreeze is onto something great, the kind of experience that reaffirms the love of the game. There is an immediately hypnotic pull to the game, a sense of shadowy wonder that blankets you with its imaginative, unsettling world.

The finer details of that world could make or break the higher experience, and it is with the brush of these details that the team is now working six days a week to paint the increasingly complex frame. Andersson speaks of the desire to command "immersion to the full extent." Immersion often lives in those details.

Details like the brutal, intense impact of the game's violence. This is one aspect that really sticks out, the visceral punch to the gut you feel when an enemy is crushed and shot and flung up against a wall in a horrible death-crunch. You can have an intense first-person shooting experience, but the pop to the senses is what separates the rugged men of war from the school-yard boys.

There's a drama to just watching the action unfold—watching a character suddenly decapitated without warning, watching a vulgar little creature known as a Darkling saw a victim in two, watching an out-of-control vehicle crash and burn through a wall. The Darkness nails its imagery with devious force, siphoned from a keen eye for the atmospheric and emotional.

Part of the game's hook is Jackie's reliance on the thick, dominant shadows as a source of energy to fuel his darkness powers. As a member of a warring mafia family whose uncle wants him dead, Jackie's concerns are many—including dealing with his bizarre possession. Guns do a wonderful job at dispensing with mafia cronies, but these darkness powers grow and transform into lethal killing tools throughout the game. When called upon, a pair of demon heads extends from Jackie's body like giant serpents slithering around a tree. They command their own flowing presence, whispering and demonstrating an eerie sentience. While this is obviously a game with heavy action and first-person mechanics, developing Jackie's character and personal convictions in a narrative game world is part of the foundation. Perhaps there will be more to these wicked entities battling with Jackie's mind than we might first believe...

With his powers, Jackie can form a mini black hole to dramatically suck the life—and chairs and shelves and TV and couch—out of the area, or search through enclosed spaces, or even impale and thrash the life out of his victims. But with his controlled evil he also gains the aid of the Darklings. They look like a cross between a giant prehistoric bat and a Gremlin and the pet demon-spawn you'd imagine Satan keeping at the foot of his bed at night for comfort. They provide humor and simple aid amidst their indiscriminate killing ways, born from the bodies of certain corpses. Agile and able to run across walls and ceilings, the Darklings do meet their match when they contact light and disintegrate.

Ratcheting up the tangible connection to the game's world is one of the more organic, accurate physics systems you'll find. When you use your dark tentacles to pick up objects like, say, that stupid police car in your way, the vehicle crumples while the doors convincingly flap around, knocking a big trash bin on its side as the covers open. The smallest of objects are treated to incredibly accurate responses to your actions. Even a sledgehammer (Darklings like to use sledgehammers) looks absolutely right when a bullet nicks the head, bumping it along the ground.

Starbreeze doesn't want to reveal too much on the game. There are things I know and shouldn't, things you'll appreciate finding on your own. The game takes place in New York, but let's just say thematic progressions inspire some wild twists. There are shotguns and dual pistols and machine guns and execution moves that shatter a bullet up the throat. There are Darklings that seem pointless at first, but then they... well, to reveal would ruin the fun.

But for a few more of the details, read on and learn more about the expression behind The Darkness from some of the imaginations that have brought the universe to life.

"...a pair of demon heads extends from Jackie's body like giant serpents slithering around a tree."

INTERVIEW

JENS ANDERSSON

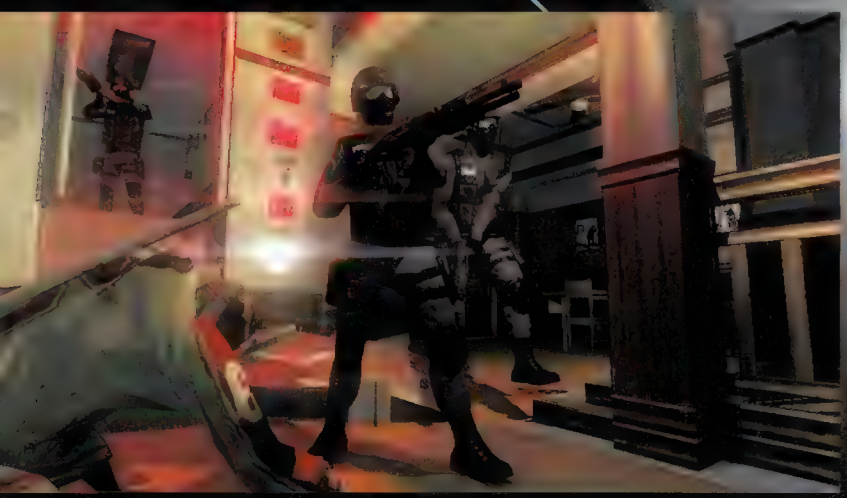
Lead Designer

Your game is called The Darkness, you've got little creatures called Darklings that run around using hacksaws and jackhammers on people, the main character is on the verge of being overwhelmed by evil. Not the sunniest of games, huh?
We have a saying in this game that goes: "There's always a light somewhere in the darkness," and I think that sums up a lot of things with the game. It's a grim and brutal game, but there are patches of light and laughter as well. Also, a game should never take itself too seriously, so the Darklings will always be there to lighten up the mood.

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay was a critical darling. Do you give a shit about any pressures to follow up?
Well, we're not feeling any specific pressure, but we are happy that people are much more interested in what we are doing now than they were before Riddick. It's all good.

The game looks awesome. Just how much more freedom do you have to do what you want with the new hardware?
Lots more freedom. The core technology with the normal-mapping and stuff had to run on the original Xbox for Riddick, so there were so many things we couldn't do because the hardware wasn't powerful enough.

When I first got my hands on The Darkness, one of the first things you mentioned was how important it was to build "immersion to the fullest extent." What exactly does immersion mean to you?
Well, to us doing a first person game is a choice to do a game where the player is supposed to feel that he



Back again, huh, kid? Couldn't stay away from the old pisser?

game. This is what we usually mean with immersion; to make the player feel that he is the person that is running around within the game-world. For us, it's only natural to continue on that path and try to make the experience as realistic for the player as possible. In Riddick that meant making sure you saw your own body and the shadow of it and in Darkness we've taken that further in where you for example have your own body interact with the environment.

And what are some key factors to creating this immersion?
One of the most important things is not to break the trust of the player. The character you are playing should never do anything or make a choice that the player feels that he would never have done. Of course, it's best if the player is in full control to make those things himself, but at some points you need to guide him in the right direction. Other important things to us are to make everything look and behave realistically, especially other characters. There are still too many games where people don't react to holding a gun in someone's face. The game should never remind the player that he is playing a game, so anything gamey like save-systems and on-screen elements should be

The game [illegible] to have a really robust physics system. How important is the environmental interaction to the gameplay?
Originally, the physics was mostly a visual thing for us, we felt that we needed it in [illegible] a believable world. But as [illegible] when developing games, [illegible] a life of its own and soon we started to find interesting ways to utilize it in the gameplay. It's not going to be a big gameplay element like the physics puzzles you see in Half-Life 2 or anything, but you'll soon realize its use when you throw a car at a bunch of mobsters shooting at you.

You're a big fan of the movie Strange Days.
Good movie! The opening sequence was actually something we used to convince Majesco, the original publisher for Darkness, that it should be a first-person game.

What part of the game is getting more attention: the darkness powers or straight shooting?
Well, we are certainly giving the darkness powers a lot of attention since they're one of the core features of the game, but we are of course also doing interesting stuff with the shooting. As for what will be given the most attention from the player it depends on his style of play.

Pual Jenkins was incredibly enthusiastic about the story. This is a big part of the experience?
Yes, for a lot of people it will be a big part of the game, but we are very careful not to try to impose a story on players who aren't that interested in that. It was also important to us that you wouldn't have had to read the comic to be able to fully appreciate the game.

Stories fail time after time. Am I right or wrong?
Perhaps. It's still an early industry, and there are no set rules in how to effectively tell as story in games. I really don't like what some people are saying, that we should take after the movie industry in this area. Movies are not an interactive medium, so games need a different set of rules. Still, stories in games are improving a lot the last couple of years and there also seem to be so many ways to tell a story. Hopefully Darkness will help pushing the boundary a bit further as well.

What's been a mounting challenge during the development cycle?
To get those damn Darklings to find a path and move properly along the walls.
Other than that I think just the scope of what we are trying to do is what's been the toughest. Our team is almost double the

> "The game should never remind the player that he is playing a game."

size of the Riddick team, and to manage all that as well as realizing that we no longer accept a lot of problems and glitches in a game that we thought were ok earlier.

Your favorite darkling?
It's still up in the air what darkling gets in and who doesn't, but my current favorite is the trusty old albino berserker darkling equipped with a sledgehammer. It's very satisfying when he knocks people to the ground and finishes them off.

Your favorite execution kill?
It's a dual-pistol move where you approach your enemy from behind, knock him down on the ground with the backside of your gun and while he is lying on the ground you put one single bullet in his head.

Did the executions come as an extension of the mechanic in Riddick?
They were actually implemented quite far into the Darkness development. Since Jackie is a very gun-heavy guy, we chose to not have a big focus on hand-to-hand combat. But we really missed some of those intense moments you got in Riddick, so the solution was to create a similar system but to combine it with guns. It became really spectacular and great fun.

The Darkness is dramatic even if you're just watching. Presentation is big to you

guys?
Yes, of course. Action is a big part of the game and we want people to get adrenaline kicks by playing the game, just like big action sequence in a good movie. Of course, watching a game can never compare to playing a game, especially a first person game, since you are so much closer to the things happening on screen.

How do you balance gameplay with story and cinematic moments to keep the flow of the game proper?
This was one of the things that we had problems to figure out in Riddick. The simple answer would be variation. As long as the player has something new to do or learn it's usually works, but you also need take into account what the player has done the level before to get the pacing right. In Darkness, we focused on this from the beginning, and since its story intense game we fleshed out the story and decided all the levels very early in the production. After that we fleshed out the whole game in low detail and could test the pacing of the whole game just a few months into the development.

Do you think a lot about new ways to maintain the player's connection with the game?
It would be real simple if you played your own character, but in Darkness you play Jackie Estacado. Now, to have a predefined character like that has of course a lot of benefits, but you have to make sure the player can feel that he is in control over that character. It's a tricky balance, especially in a first person game where you don't see your character as well as a third person game. This is why we introduced cutting out to third person during specific actions and it works quite well.

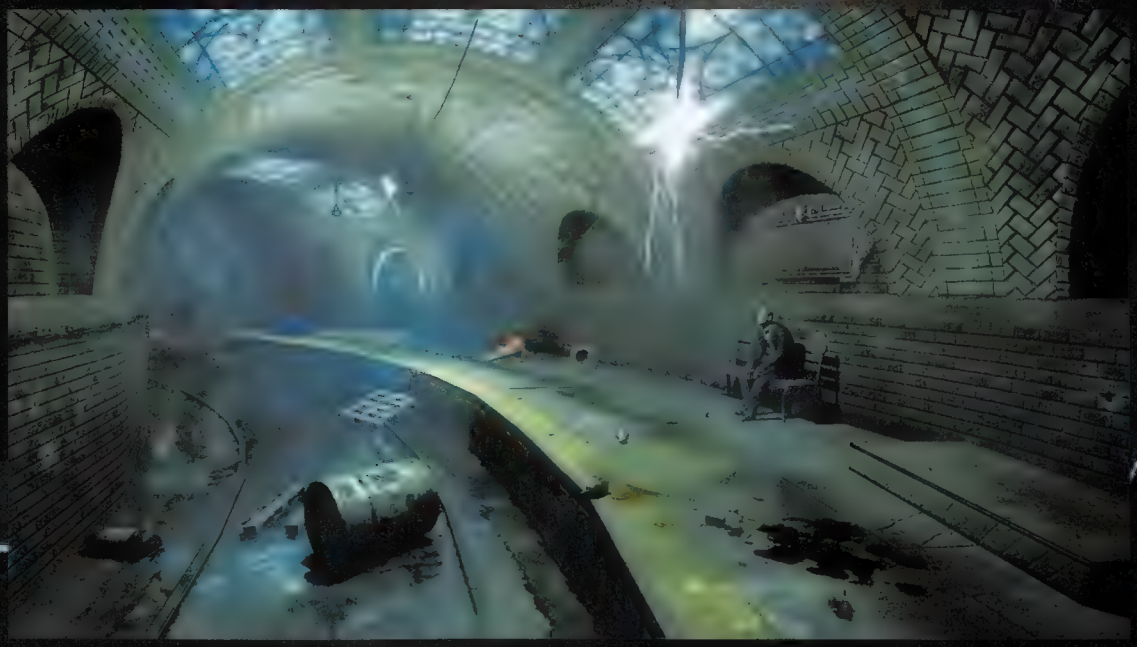
You've chosen to avoid a hud.
Yes. HUDs reminds you that you are playing a game. We use HUDs when we develop the game-mechanics but in the end we always try to find ways to give the player the exact same information within the game-world.

> "The Darkness is also a very violent game at times, and we expect a mature rating, but we use violence as a tool to amplify the story and the mood."

We talked a bit about going too far with the violence.
There are many ways violence can be portrayed in games. As with most other things we want the game to be as realistic as possible, so it would make no sense for us to have violence in a splatter way like, for example, Mortal Kombat. The Darkness is also a very violent game at times, and we expect a mature rating, but we use violence as a tool to amplify the story and the mood. But we go over the top at times, since we are dealing with demons and such and use that as comic relief in an otherwise very dark game.

What's the deal with the television programming throughout the game?
The TV in the game is a very simple idea. The game takes place in New York, and in a modern New York you need televisions. If you have televisions you need to have something running on them. When we looked at what we could have running on TVs we found out that there are a lot of really cool movies out there that are public domain, and not only crappy movies but movies like Hitchcock's How to Kill a Mockingbird or Nosferatu. Still, it's a legal nightmare to make sure they're really public domain, but if we get hold of enough content we will make sure there are different channels like a Hitchcock channel or a zombie-movie channel. We also see the advantage of using this system as a narrative tool to give story related information to the player.

I'm curious how you approach tuning the control. Every first-person game feels slightly different.
Controls are a delicate business. The first time I played Halo was when we were working on Enclave which also had a dual-stick control-scheme. I hated that they had jump on the A button. But of course, if you don't do that as default today people will complain. So, it's obviously more important that people feel at home with the controller than that it's unique and potentially better. At least, that is how we see it, but that doesn't mean that there isn't room for improvement. Also, in Darkness we have a completely configurable control scheme which is always a step up.



What game would you point to that has the most intuitive, natural control scheme in the genre.
I could be flamed for this, but no first-person control-scheme could be considered intuitive. It's a complex control-scheme that requires the simultaneous use of both analogue sticks. Of course, once you learn it, it feels natural, but that also means that the system that most people have learned is the best one. That means Halo.

You're doing something incredibly innovative with the way Jackie's guns are positioned when up against solid objects or around a corner.
Yes. That was a bit of experimentation that turned into something very cool. The aiming system automatically analyzes the environment close to the player and moves Jackie's hands to position the currently held weapons so that they have a straight line of fire towards whatever the player is looking at. Now, this is cool in many ways. First of all, your character starts to interact with the environment, but it also solves the problem where you want to fire at what you look at in the center of the screen while also have bullets exit the weapon's muzzle in the bottom of the screen. With this aiming system, your weapons will move into position to always fire at what you look at. Since there is an inbuilt delay in this system, a neat side-effect is that it becomes almost identical to tried and true auto-aiming systems in other first-person shooters. But instead of some sort of game-mechanic thing that you need HUD-elements to convey it becomes a natural element of the game.

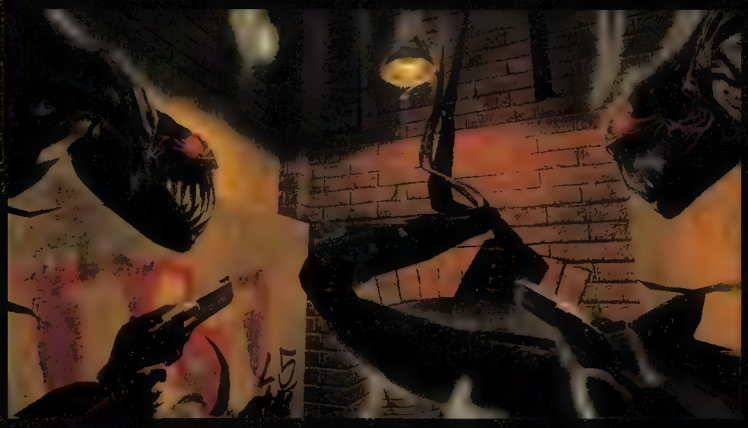
What's the deal with the open conversation interface?
It's an evolvement of the dialog-system we had in Riddick. It was one of those instances where you felt that the game took the controls away from you that we wanted to get rid of. In Darkness you can walk up to a person and talk to him, and walk away whenever you want. Of course, that meant that we had to make people react to all the weird stuff you could do when they were talking like pulling your gun on them or walking away, but that just proved to make things more interesting.

When I first met you and we spoke about your intentions with the game, you seemed extremely confident.
You must have caught me on one of the good days.

INTERVIEW

[MARC SILVESTRI, MATT HAWKINS]

Top Cows



Play: You've mentioned that the whole process of making The Darkness has been exceptional for you.
Marc Silvestri: It's true, and we've really been saying this to a lot of people. Video games now, it's really no different than Hollywood, as far as the developer is concerned. The stakes are as high, in some case higher. All we can do as producers, as creators of the original content, is kind of position ourselves and the people we're gonna be working with as best as we possibly can... And we thought, man, these guys just get it. They had just done Riddick, there was buzz on that. And it's important, obviously. But buzz is one thing. You know... There's sizzle. When you hear the sizzle, I gotta eat that steak. This is really, really important to me and Matt. The Darkness has been around for ten years... Everything just seems to be falling into place. Finally, we went, let's pull the trigger. This is as good as we're gonna get and possibly even better than we had hoped. So we said, "Ok, let's make the deal. Let's really let these guys go."

As an artist, as a creator, it's one thing to see your character in a movie, it's something quite different watching it come to life in a game. You now control that creation. Very cool.
It's extremely cool. PS2 has just come out when we created The Darkness. We thought, wow, that's great technology, but you know what, you look back today at a game like Oddworld, it's still a fun visual game, but very primitive. So it was like, Ok, that's the game you're gonna get. And there's still developers making those kinds of game. But we don't want that game. We want this game. We want the Starbreeze game. So when an opportunity came, hell yeah... The translation, not only was it smooth out of the respect for the original concept, but we found the Starbreeze guys were adding to it.
Hawkins: Yeah, they were really making it better.
Silvestri: They were just making it better than it was. Are you kidding me? Not only do we not have to fight you guys about making it good, we are actually sitting there going, these guys are making it better!

Starbreeze has made some changes. There's been freedom to kind of change The Darkness costume, and...
Hawkins: And they've made good changes, they made sense.

That's cool that you support that.
One of the early things, was the discussion of Jackie. In the comic book, he [illegible] this costume. Which in the comic-book world is fine. And in certain respects, you can transfer that—Batman, Spider-Man, whatever. The Darkness, what we kind of realized—especially when the idea was pitched, just seeing Jackie in his trench coat and looking badass, because he's a hit man and he's cool and all that stuff. What we were kind of realizing was, hey, I get it, not everyone knows who The Darkness is. Everyone knows who Spider-Man is, but not everyone knows The Darkness. Most people will be exposed though the video game. And we're going, you've got all these really cool visual things with the powers. Starbreeze has done an amazing job with the tentacles, the darklings, throwing this stuff around in this great 3D world, why distract from that with this elaborate costume. We don't need it anymore. Jackie himself is so damned cool, just as Jackie. Now he's got this power. I get it. You guys [illegible] let's keep it that way.

[illegible] the things, they didn't want [illegible] think of it as a super hero. They wanted a guy and his powers, relatable to an every day guy.
One thing we have over at Top Cow, which is rule No. 1 when you're creating something new. Whether we create it in house, whether I create it or Matt creates it or anyone working with us, the only thing we ask of you is, make it so you want to be that guy. Then worry more what he looks like. Make it so that no matter what the power is, even if it's a, quote-unquote, curse. Make it cool to be him. Don't make it so unreal and so horrible that you have no interest in being him. So Jackie is just this guy that, you think, damn, you know what, in an alternate universe, maybe in my next life, that's the guy I want to be. It's the nurture and nature thing about that character. He was raised by assholes, he was raised by the mob. He was raised by a code of kill or be killed. Then he's given this great power. But at his core, the kind of themes we play with, it'll be in the movie, and we're exploring in the comic book as well, is that Jackie's greatest fear, that underneath all that—the money the power the girls—there's something exposed, something greater there. Ultimately, and deep down inside, this guy is a hero.
Hawkins: Even those he's a dark hero, he's absolutely a hero, yeah.

> "You want to be that guy. Then worry more what he looks like... Don't make it so unreal and so horrible that you have no interest in being him."

One thing I wanted to ask you, how did you come up with the idea of the power of the darkness? The shadows and the dark.
Initially, I always liked the idea of being able to create something. And I'm a huge fan, since I was a kid, of vampires, of Dracula. I wanted those limitations, where the limitations for that were that the guy could only do his shit at night. And what if you had this guy who had this amazing power, but there's this caveat: in the sunrise, all that disappears, and you're as vulnerable as the next guy. Jackie's power is limited, kind of like Superman and his kryptonite. You have to fight him on his terms for him to have the extreme advantage, but the important thing about Jackie, and this is how it is in the game, the guy can handle a gun. But sometimes he's overwhelmed. You use the Darkness power for that. It's all about Jackie, and the concept spreads out from that, the world spreads out from that. Then it was developed that he has sort of a Mob persona, and kind of that world sort of developed around him. But from day one, ten years ago, he hasn't really changed. We just thrilled that not only everyone involved in the game respected that, but actually added to that.

INTERVIEW

PAUL JENKINS

Comic-book hero

[redacted]

Hawkins: Yeah, one of the things we talked about early on... And we both play games. I play everything. We've seen a million crappy plug-and-play games. A ton of licensed crap. It's always thrown out there. We would really just rather it not exist... We decided creatively early on, it has to be good for us to get involved. That's when Union came in, and we made a deal with them and brought in Starbreeze and Dan [Jevons, creative director] introduced the original document for the game. We realized that this was gonna be special.

That darker side, when you present it seductively and subtly, you can't help but want to indulge in it.
It's like the Hulk. You know what, it's the id. I get it. But the Hulk to me is like the werewolf. Who wants to be the Hulk. He's an idiot. He's a big idiot. He doesn't get the chicks. Dracula was cool, he got the chicks. And that's kind of Jackie... And again, you wanna be him. We're just having a great time with it. All that stuff transfers really well.

This is definitely a shifting paradigm in the way we can tell a story.
Yeah, it really is. That's where guys like us are really happy to contribute. 10 years ago when the character came up in a game, the storytelling wasn't really in the equation. You came up with a goofy character who had some abilities, that's pretty much it. You play that. But now they're so immersive, you can't stop that now. So these story guys become so much more important. It's now more than just a 3D game, it's a 3D universe. Starbreeze can create that world that just wasn't possible before, and make it completely believable. You can be this guy. Your decisions affect this guy. That's awesome. And that's gonna come more and more as the years go on.

> "Starbreeze can create that world that just wasn't possible before, and make it completely believable."

You talked about some things you disagreed on.
There were a few things, but the conversations lasted five minutes... They thought taking Jackie out of the darkness armor and putting him into the trench coat would be a big deal, so they were prepared for this big fight with us on it. And they called up and said they didn't want to use the darkness armor, and we were like, oh. Ok. They were ready to fight.

Everyone's going to comics right now for games and movies. Why do you think that is specifically?
This is gonna seem like a trite answer, but I really believe it: technology. That's all it is. I believe that the stories that comic books have been telling for years [illegible] different than the stories that have been told around campfires for thousands of years. The hero's journey. The guy that you wanna be and vanquishes [illegible] his way in an incredibly big [illegible] just shoot somebody. They c[illegible] spectacular. So on our end of the business it was more like, when technology caught up... The challenge for us is finding those people who will do it right.

play. How did you approach the material for The Darkness game?
Paul Jenkins: What we did was, we adapted it from various different materials that already existed. And that's a relatively hard thing to do when that was adapted from something you had written, because the temptation is to go back and write the same thing over again. But you have to step away and look at it clinically, and imagine if this material had never been given to anybody before, no one had seen it. Which is relatively true in some ways. It's a license that when it comes out as a video game, it will enter the awareness of American pop culture much more than just the comic book right now. So we ba[illegible] reinvented it. We sort of said, "let's take a look at some of the most impactful [illegible] in the stories." And we pulled [illegible] but we didn't necessarily find [illegible] have to the details. We just [illegible] we thought would really [illegible] you get the Darkness [illegible] new property. But it's [illegible] something that's been around. [illegible] really took some of the better [illegible] is tragedies with his life. One [illegible] really interesting about Mafia [illegible] the idea of dysfunctional families. We all have these problems, where crazy Uncle Larry is a pain in the ass. So you go to crazy Uncle Larry's house and he's making a fool of himself. That's the sort of things we see in Jacky. Jacky just wants a little normality in his life. His way of getting that normality is shooting people. It's really borne out in the opening chaotic scene of the game when the two guys are driving. It really sets the tone of the game in that, the first thing you see, you really imagine what his life must be like. He's driving along, people shooting each other, and they're talking about, like, baseball. These people are absolutely mad.

You've written thousands of lines of dialogue for The Darkness.
We wrote 20 thousand lines of AI and response dialogue, but we couldn't use it all because of time constraints. We had to pick from it, which is a pretty difficult thing to do when you're just one writer. But I just wanted to keep my voice on everything we did. I have really strong theories about what makes games work. One of my very strongly held opinions is that the rule of watching a movie is that you sit there in a movie theater for two hours, you eat popcorn and you drink coke. But when it comes into your house, and you're now watching on your big-screen TV, the rules are different. You can stop it, rewind it, pause it, you can go make a sandwich, do whatever you need to do. When you open a comic, you read it, you turn the pages back a little bit. The rules of a video game really haven't been that defined, but they should be: you move your fingers to manipulate a character through a world, and you never take your hands off the control. I'm not fond of full-motion video in games. I believe everything should be scripted interactive sequences. We tried to address this in The Darkness. We couldn't completely do it, but we mostly did it.
A similar thing is with AIs. I really feel AIs makes the world. And we're continuing to even now program more AIs, writing more and more dialogue. When you walk by characters, they'll often initiate a dialogue with each other. Sometimes certain characters like the mobsters, they'll even tell you a joke if they idle for a while. And we did that 50 times, so you can hear any one of 50 jokes. Or they may just say the most random things. The bums say really profound things. It's these details that make the game that much more interesting. It's a piece of fun, as well as a really immersive experience. It even carries a sad tone at one point. There are certain characters, for very specific reasons, start reverting to really, really sad war poetry. It's all set in context. We're really attempting to bring the player through a set of

very strong feelings. The goal is absolutely there. We're learning a lot with this game.

You very much believe in the medium of games.
I totally believe in the medium of games. When I started writing games, I came in from the comic world, and what I was told and what I found was that a lot of developers were saying, "Oh, here we go, Hollywood's coming." A lot of people come into games and they think the idea is to write up a bunch of ideas for a developer, and the developer looks at them and goes, "They're all completely useless, none of it can be manufactured into a game." What I did, because I cared about making sure my writing fit the medium, was to learn what the programmers did, learn what the designers did, to learn the entire process. Not that I could completely understand it, but what it did was get me to a point where I was actually a producer on a game and a level designer as well...

You were quite involved on Hulk.
Yeah, just to digress on Hulk for a second. They asked me, what did I think. And I said I didn't have the highest opinion of it. And they were very open to hearing what I thought. I said, look, there's a basic flaw in the story, thematically in a sense, that you didn't pay attention to in the story telling. You want to be big and strong as the Hulk, but you never initiate combat. You always walk in, walk down a tunnel and somebody fires at you. You think, oh no, I'm a soldier! You're not a soldier, you're supposed to be the hulk. So in the other game there's a free roaming mission, in which you walked around, and every time you felt like beating the shit out of something, you did. It had this massive impact feeling. So when I first went to meet with those guys, they asked what was the main requirement. We started writing on a whiteboard: ultimate [illegible] ultimate smashup. Power. Then [illegible] next to that choices. In story telling terms, we should make choices, and allow the player to always choose. In gameplay terms, we're gonna make him feel big. And you never take one of these down. So your story has to be as equal as your gameplay. And that's what happened with The Darkness. They said, the story is equal: it's not better, it's not more, it's not less. It's cheap to fix story, keep moving it around. But it's really expensive to move gameplay and design around. So you have to dedicate to never messing your story up and creating for it. These guys have been brilliant.

Yeah, the game is nailing some really big elements.
The game really makes you feel as though you could be Jackie. It's not a film yet, but we're working points in that are getting you there. There are great cinematic touches. These guys are such great artists. When they walk in and they try to make it a piece of theater, they understand what should be theater. We talked about that when I was in Sweden: why are we making theater out of this stuff? We're making a theater because it's entertaining. But it happens to have you control the actors. So let's try and do [illegible] ten years, we'll whip [illegible] We may not be pulling it [illegible] we're trying.

There's probably debate as to how far we should go to follow a direction of film.
Here's the thing that has to be understood. If you deny the fact that this is ultimately a medium in which you f***ing have to smash things up... What does a player want to do? They want to smash stuff up. If you get a chance to kill a guy, or not kill him, you're gonna kill him. You have to, have to, have to accept that as a writer of a game. So you better allow everybody to have fun.

One of the reasons bringing big hollywood screenwriters often doesn't work is that they come in, wanting to tell their story, here's my story, this is what I'm used to writing. And they don't take into account you have to write around and for gameplay.
It's so difficult. It takes so much time for me to understand how things work. It's not my job, man. I've been in comics for years, now I've got to learn an entire new industry. But I find that to be an interesting challenge. I really want to know what these guys do. I don't want to know everything, but I do want to know how the process works.

One last question. You said you feel games are truly an artform.
They're a tapestry. When you begin with a blank slate, a piece of paper, and you create something from it, that is a form of art. I will try to explain in terms of a very strange movie I saw recently. A film called Max, and it was about Adolph Hitler when he came back from the first world war, and he was at the crossroads of his life, and he wanted to be a painter. And he found that he was a horrible painter. He just couldn't express himself because he never truly expressed his inner feelings. His inner feelings were very tormented. But he learned of a new science, called propaganda—the manipulation of people's emotions by speaking. Interestingly enough, we're not doing propaganda, but that what a film is in a sense, it moves people's emotion. That's what a video game is. I'll submit to you one example of a brilliant video game that does it perfectly, Fatal Frame... They've engineered your emotions to scare you. That's what a video game should make you do: make you happy, make you sad, make you feel.

Like any good form of art.
Absolutely like any good form of art. It's a form of expression that enables people to get a cathartic emotion, you experience emotion, you purge yourself of it. But it's also just a great way to spend time. play

"It's all set in context. We're really attempting to bring the player through a set of very strong feelings."

UNION JACK

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Namco Bandai Games
Developer	Namco Bandai Games	Avail.	October

Tales of the Abyss

It's not abysmal, it's *abyssalicious!*

words **Casey Loe**

In Japan, the Tales series cannot be stopped. It's spawned 18 installments in just over 10 years, and *four more* Tales games will be hitting the shelves within the next six months. In America, on the other hand, the series just can't seem to get started. It's Namco's own fault for committing all the usual sins—yearlong turnarounds, skipped games, renumbered installments and half-assed localizations. But the new Nam-dai is finally putting some love behind the series, and it's time we did the same. By my calculations, 80% of the Japanese RPGs released in the next five years will be "Tales of [something]" (with the rest being "Final Fantasy [something] XIII"), so if you don't embrace the series now, you'll be in for a dry couple of years.

Luckily for you, this is the perfect time to hop on board. Japanese fans widely regard Tales of the Abyss as the best game in the series, and it's not hard to see why. While no one aspect of Abyss is knock-your-socks-off spectacular, the story, graphics, mechanics and localization all come together beautifully to create a long and satisfying adventure that's free of any conspicuous flaws. The battles provide the series' best mix yet of visceral action and light strategy, and the story is well-written and entertaining.

The game's hero is Luke, an aristocratic shut-in who ends up trapped behind enemy lines and just wants to get home. I hate the recent RPG trend of asshole-as-main-character, but Tales of Abyss does it right by giving hero Luke an interesting background and playing his ignorance and cruelty for laughs instead of depicting him as the height of cool. Everyone in the supporting cast has a similarly strong personality, and unlike most RPGs where characters fade into the background after they join your quest, your party members continue to flirt, banter, and bicker enjoyably throughout the game. The trademark Tales "skit" system is back, allowing players who don't care for extraneous event scenes to skip them without missing any plot points, but I have yet to be willing to pass one up. Tales games have had localization problems in the past, but so far the voice acting in Abyss has been strong, and the script is full of sharp humor and deft characterizations.

We'll be back with an official review next month, but I won't keep you in suspense—barring any unpleasant surprises in the final build, expect an enthusiastic thumbs-up. **play**

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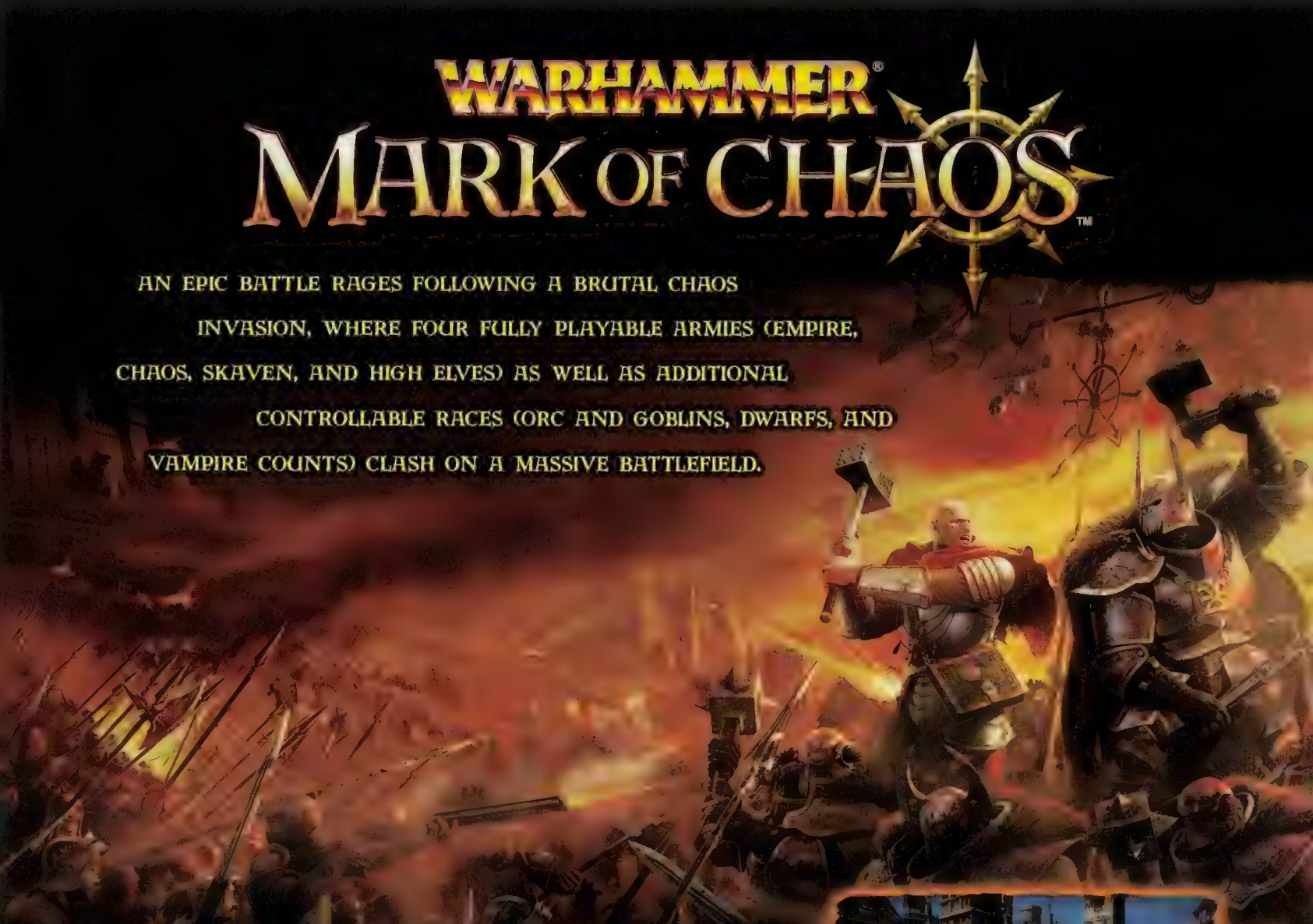
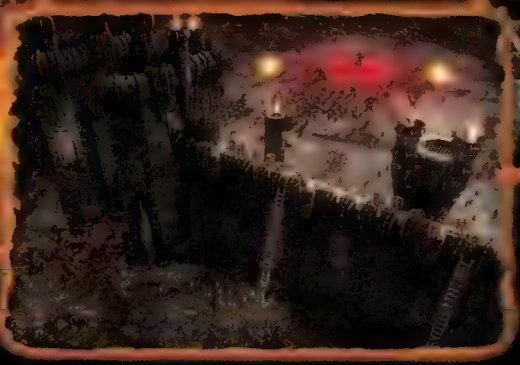


As armies battle, Heroes and Champions learn new tactics, unlock new abilities, command larger units, even challenge each other in a duel to the death.



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System(s)	PS3	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Insomniac	Available	November

Resistance: Fall of Man

words **Brady Fiechter**

"We're going back to our roots," says Insomniac president and CEO Ted Price. Standing in front of a mammoth 55 inch LCD screen, Price continues to frantically blast his way through an awful war-torn scene of exploding comrades and alien creatures that leap at his face, attempting to gnaw off anything they can get their spindly teeth on. For a company known for the playful Ratchet & Clank and Spyro the Dragon series, the violent and dark first-person shooter Resistance: Fall of Man is going back to the company's roots?

Insomniac actually broke into the industry with a sci-fi FPS called Disruptor. Price recalls that the game didn't do very well despite strong critical success, but it's always been a genre they've loved—a genre they feel could uniquely benefit from the stalwart experience of working with the weapons-heavy tactical action of Ratchet & Clank. When you play Resistance, the skilled influences from past Insomniac games are strongly felt.

Battles take place in real cities drawn from England, and while the E3 demo left the impression that bombed out buildings might dominate the setting, Price is quick to point out this is definitely not the case. The story behind Resistance: Fall of Man follows a fictional 1951 reality where World War II never occurred, with actual history replaced by an attack of an alien race known as the Chimera. Anachronistic technology snakes through recognizable interior and exterior sections of various cities, going underground at times for more claustrophobic gameplay. Insomniac stressed that variety has been a driving philosophy behind every component of Resistance's design, and as more of the game is revealed, you see the fruits of their labor.

Some of the weapons borrow from authentic designs of the time period, but once you go deeper into the game, you'll utilize more exotic firepower from the alien stashes and alien/human blends. Rockets can be suspended in air, redirected and pinpointed with the point of your laser site. Blob sacks can be laid down like land minds, adhering to surfaces for a strategic blast. And sure to be popular is the hedgehog, a giant ball of 50 spikes that explodes into whatever unlucky life is in the area. The hedgehog is one of the highlights of the game's advanced physics and AI system, which Price points out is "the kind of thing that brings processors to their knees."

Death animations are obviously hugely important to the impact of a first-person shooter. Ragdoll physics have been combined with traditional animation to put the focus on naturalistic, convincing movements and reactions to your actions. On the PS2, Insomniac typically applied 30 animations a character. Resistance plays with over 400, which certainly shows. Throughout the demonstration of the game, Insomniac continued to point out how they keep on learning more and more about the power of the PS3. This engine has been built completely from the ground up. When asked just how long the game has been in production, Price deflects an answer to the most important fact: let the end product speak for itself. **play**

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System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Publisher	Sierra
Developer	Day 1 Studios	Available	November

FEAR

The darkness is not your friend

Who is this delightful little girl anyway?

words **Brady Fiechter**

Fear is watching a little girl use her mental powers to eviscerate your highly trained comrades where they stand, leaving melted flesh and bones in a sea of blood. Fear is having cloaked assassins dance in with surgical strikes as they appear out of nowhere, disappearing as quickly as they came for the next attack. Fear is moving through complete darkness, with a feeble flashlight and flicker of light down the far hall to guide you while some vile, mutated creature stalks your every movement.

These are the types of threats you hand off to the governmental boys who take care of paranormal problems. They're called First Encounter Assault Recon, and despite most of them getting mutilated by this latest and messiest round of weirdness, the good news is that you're the best, and with everyone dying around you, you're on the way to a promotion and hero worship.

Killing tools at hand include weaponry such as the corkscrew missile launcher and the sub-nuclear blaster. Grenades also come into play, especially the percussion type, which send bodies snapping back and debris flying. With the game's excellent physics modeling, throwing a grenade is doubly fun when a light fixture gets tossed around in the blast, illuminating the darkness. Soldiers bend and collapse with a painful realism.

Slow motion in games isn't anything new, but F.E.A.R.S.' putting a nice little spin on the function by pure technique of design. With increased mental acuity, toying with the passage of time brings everything into a blurry halt, allowing you to, say, pump a few shotgun blasts into a charging foe, practically snapping him in two; or finding a more focused strategy when the room is filled with resistance. Some games pull this off and it still feels mechanical. Here it never ceases to hit you with a rush.

F.E.A.R. is a game of atmosphere and tension as much as a straight, frenetic first-person action experience. Nothing too original in the gameplay, but impressive components like superb enemy awareness—this thing's tough—and fantastic level design abound. **play**

"Fear is watching a little girl use her mental powers to eviscerate your highly trained comrades where they stand."

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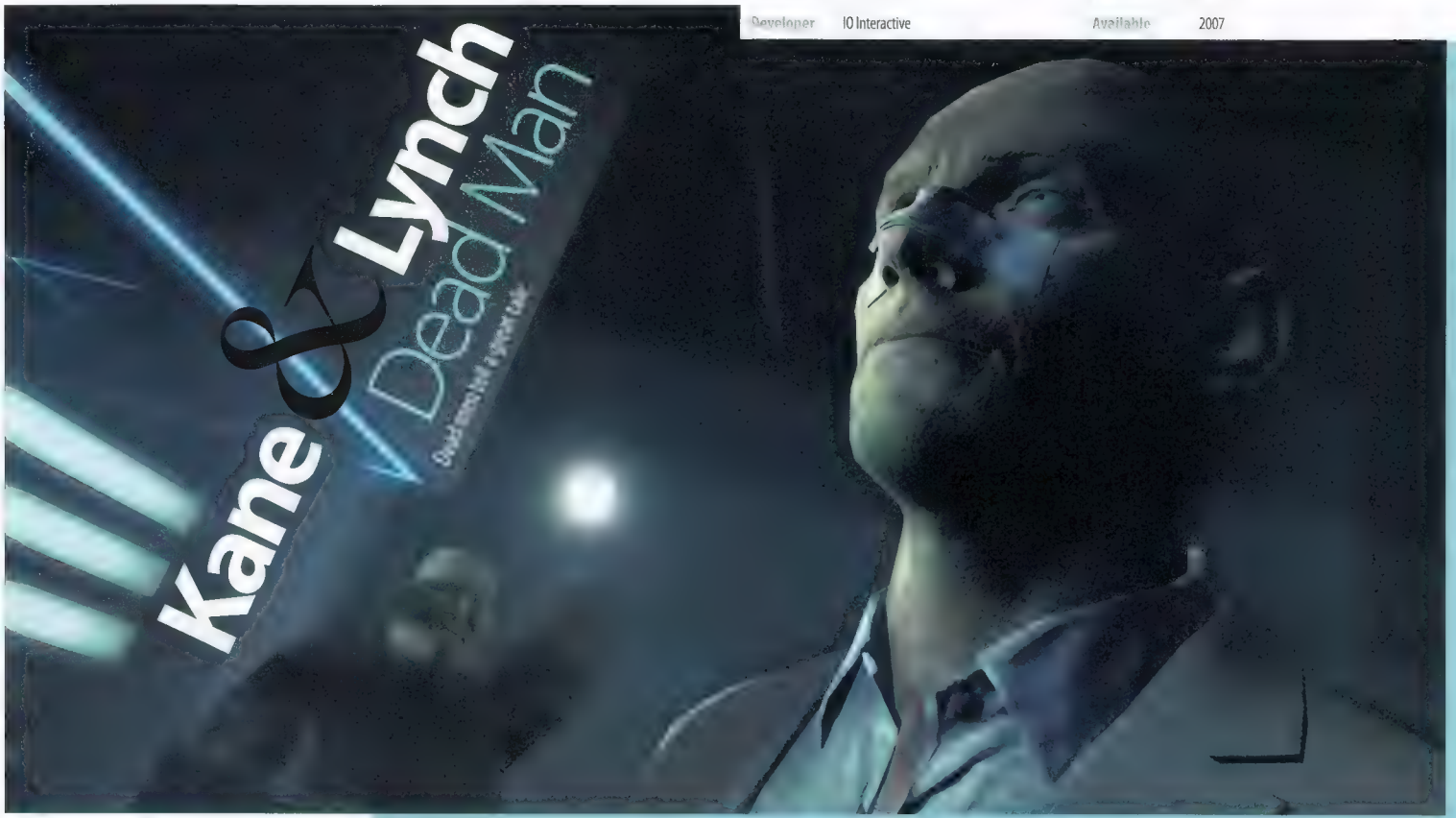
System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Eidos
Developer	IO Interactive	Available	2007



words **Greg Orlando**

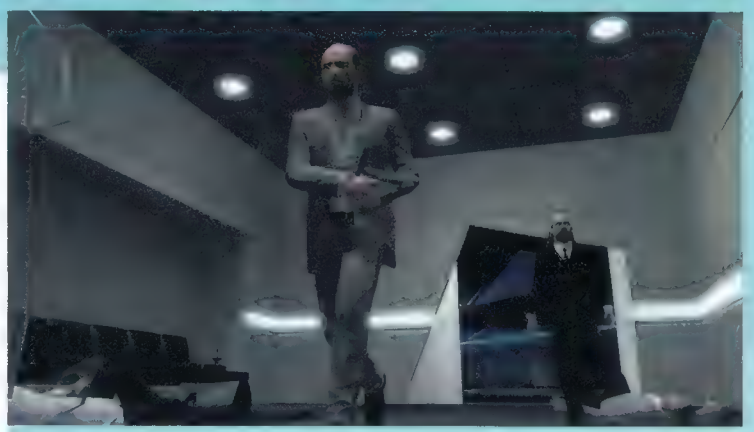
Few will care to have Misters Kane and Lynch over for afternoon tea.

The ex-mercenary Kane has a face like six miles of bad road, complete with a useless right eyeball. His reluctant partner Lynch, to be frank, is a balding and murderous nutjob, a clinically insane former teacher reliant on drugs to keep him on an even keel.

Many may want to have Kane & Lynch: Dead Men in either their Xbox 360s or PCs. The game, a fusion of developer IO Interactive's popular Hitman and its lesser known Freedom Force, puts these two anti-heroes together for a dark and sweeping third-person perspective adventure.

Neither Kane nor Lynch is particularly pleased to be one-half of this disturbed duo, but the force of destiny has them working side-by-side. In the game's single-player mode, players take the role of Kane; co-op allows access to either protagonist.

The game's influences are easily spotted. A Japanese nightclub is the perfect setting for a challenge straight out of Hitman, with the pair pushing their way past a huge and pulsing crowd in order to find their target. Here, the game shows its graphical prowess; the crowd is huge and so densely packed so as to make maneuvering through it difficult. (IO suggests it can pack 500-1,000 bodies into each group scene.) Flashing blue neon lights are perfectly tuned to the game's music, and the strobe effect proves genuinely disconcerting. It is almost a true-to-life nightclub captured within Kane & Lynch's code.



Crowd manipulation factors into the game heavily once Kane and Lynch have kidnapped their target. Firing into the air sends the masses into a shrieking, howling panic, causing them to flee wildly in all directions. This, in turn, causes hidden enemies to be revealed, with suitable gunplay ensuing.

Another mission shows off Freedom Fighter's four-player squad-based combat as Kane, Lynch, and some mercenary associates parachute in on top of a Tokyo skyscraper with malicious intent. The goal here is to infiltrate the building and, simply, kill everyone. Simple commands allow players to point at a given location and send their allies there; tapping a button on the Xbox 360's controller allows for command of a single soldier and extended press ensures the entire squad moves. Destructible environments such as desks and ornate columns shatter and splinter under a hail of gunfire, meaning that cover will only remain intact for a short period of time.

IO intends to move away from things such as extended mission briefings, allowing the game's plot to be introduced in a more natural, organic way. Similarly, the characters' histories will be revealed via flashbacks and conversations, with both protagonists filling in the blanks at regular intervals. And, in a most violent way, these dead men will have their tale told come the new year. **play**

System(s)	PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360	Publisher	Activision
Developer	Neversoft	Available	November

Tony Hawk's Project 8

words Brady Fiechter

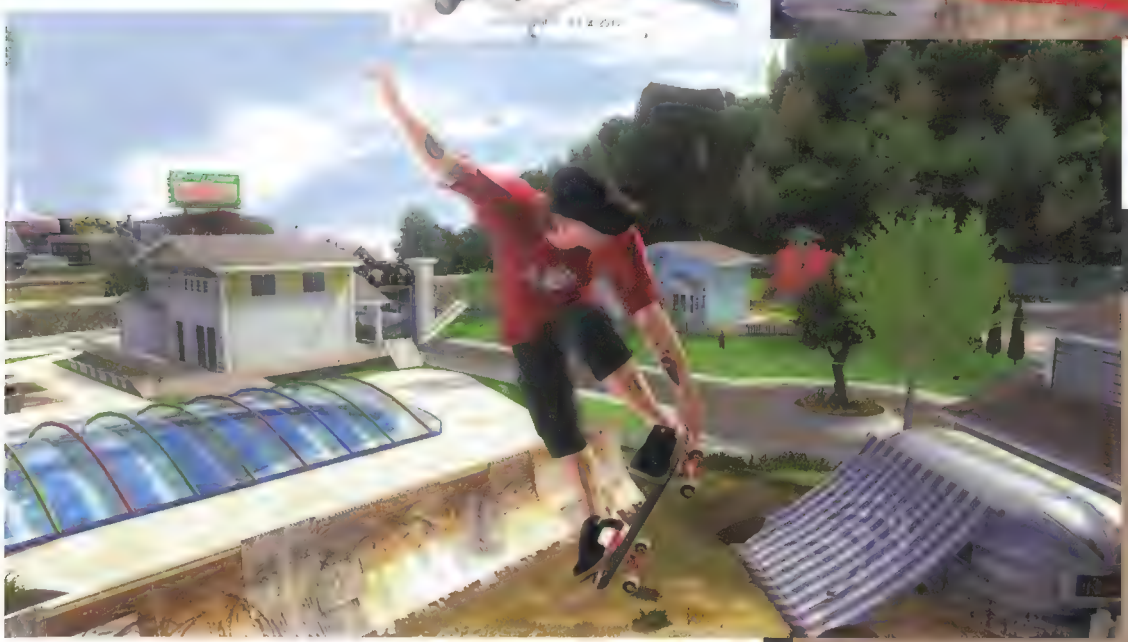
Tony Hawk's Project 8 is all about skating. Well, not *all* about skating, but for a series that's been going on for a rather long time now, it's worth recognizing that this latest Tony Hawk is very much clinging to its roots.

Tony Hawk fans don't need to worry about the foundation of their game drastically changing. Controls are the same, goals are familiar, the open world offers you all the obstacles you've come to expect.

By now, that open-world concept is expected, but obviously the next-generation possibilities are beguiling. And just how good does the bustling city and all the people who are in the way look? I wouldn't say revolutionary enough to make you feel like it's a whole new Tony Hawk experience, but the suburban-dominated areas pack plenty of advanced touches and continue with the design excellence of the best games in the series.

For all the newer intricacies the most seasoned players might start to appreciate the further they dig into Tony Hawk's Project 8, the nail-the-trick feature is what sticks out. With the appropriate air, you can engage a zoomed-in, slow-motion sequence that gives you full control over manipulating the board in any direction you feel daring enough to pull off. The analog sticks link to the left and right foot, allowing you to throw the board around in varying positions, stopping and starting the movement depending on the accuracy of the connection with the trucks. If you land wrong—and this applies to any big spill—there's a threat of a big fat hospital bill cutting into your savings.

The potential for the nail-the-technique technique to force veteran Hawk players into a new line of strategy is definitely a big draw, but just how far the game will go with it is left to be seen. Most everything else propelling Tony Hawk's Project 8 seems more or less down to thematic choices. As expected and now demanded, you'll have a ton of customizable options for your skater, which begin with a general makeup going in. Skating around the huge areas presents you with the usual allotment of people offering you challenges. You'll start ranked low, satisfy the challenges and work your way to the top. **play**



These grand city streets are just begging to be explored.

"Tony Hawk fans don't need to worry about the foundation of their game drastically changing."

.HACK

G.U. Volume 1 // Rebirth

By Dave [illegible]

Stripped from le[illegible] the way back to [illegible] that time and ef[illegible] way—the only question [illegible] walk away for good and ge[illegible] life back, or start the game a[illegible] the player (of the player) you ma[illegible] decision for Haseo and his real-w[illegible] counterpart after bearing witness to an abbreviated version of his life in "The W[illegible] 2," going from a vulnerable noob to a lev[illegible] 38 PKK (a Player-Killer Killer known as Bl[illegible] Death) before it all goes horribly wrong. Hase[illegible] goal in the game, aside from fun and adventure, was to investigate why his friend Shino fell into a coma in the real world when her in-game character was PKed by Tri-Edge, the PKK who PKed his PKK, and Shino. Tri-Edge is so powerful that he defies system parameters which is why Haseo is about to be recruited by the system administrator's secret Raven Guild to help determine where it's all gone wrong. Like the house in The Grudge, The World is possessed; its binary code somehow reaching beyond the goggles and controllers into the physical realm: one helluva glitch for sure, and its name is Tri-Edge. Meanwhile, something extraordinary is brewing within Haseo, who believes that since being PKed by Tri-Edge is what put Shino into the coma, defeating him should wake her up, and so the adventure begins [illegible]

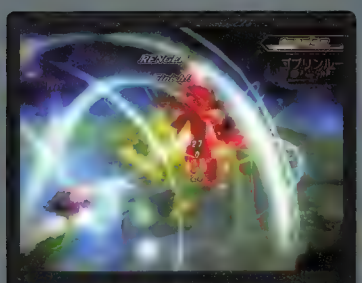
That's the trouble with MMOs…Player-Killers: Can't live with 'em, can't delete 'em.

Whether you're coming off of the original game series (in which case forget everything you know about .hack) or are new to the undulations of The World, get ready to fall deeply under GU's spell.

The gameplay consists of four major components: adventuring (a.k.a. dungeon crawling), supported by superlative real-time fighting, cavorting in the game's major areas, arena fighting, and logging out to manage your email, drop in on the forums, check out the real-world news and mess with any newly earned bonus content. Each aspect is finely tuned and impeccably designed, however, strung together as a whole they become something more than your average video game: G.U. becomes a part of you. You feel as if you are Haseo—invested and engaged as if you really were playing a living MMO, if not more so. Who you meet and how you meet them is predetermined but the game simulates the online gaming experience so well that it manages to feel organic.

Key events are linked together by sorting out residual information in the "real" world, completing adventures issued by assorted guilds, townsfolk, fellow party members, or the PSO-style Quest Shop. Otherwise you're on your own. Aside from the usual myriad of systems—managing your party and weapons and so forth—The World is your oyster, within Haseo's parameters. Word keys, earned by fulfilling goals in previous adventures, are the means forward through the warp gate into new lands, where (unlike The World 1) a given area's monsters are assessed according to your current level before you warp in. Furthering the story is carried out much like a real MMO, via guilds and character interaction. The Quest Shop always has a selection of missions for the adventurer looking to level-up and get paid in the process, and membership has its privileges back at Canard (run by the tyrannical Death Grunty) where you can use their alchemy facilities, sell found items through the guild store (where they fetch a much better price than the armory pays) and take on missions integral to your initiation as guild master. But it's not all kicking Chims and champagne dreams. There are serious undertones at work here best left to the player. I will say this though: at the point in the game where you're made to conquer the arena, level up for a couple of hours and then have at the lot of it, otherwise you'll be doing a lot of back and forth. Also, kick Silabus to the curb and go with Piros the 3rd and Atoli. See you at the review.

"Whether you're coming off of the original or are new to the undulations of The World, get ready to fall deeply under GU's spell"



Rengeki! G.U.'s battles are much like Okami's in that they take place in domes, only rather than a brush, .hack uses the Rengeki system. When a weakened enemy emits a purple glow, press R1 and let the skill of your choice fly!

Rapid Transit

Haseo can warp instantly to locations throughout each city or use his bike to get around quicker. The bike can also be used in fields. Moto Hack!

system(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox	Publisher	Warner Bros.
Developer	Eidos	Available	October

Justice League Heroes

words **Greg Orlando**

The man of steel Superman and the dark knight detective Batman are storming though the silver-gray hallways of Science and Technology Advanced Research Laboratories (aka S.T.A.R. Labs). As they approach an entranceway, a huge hovering robot blocks their path. It's one of Brainiac's minions, and its appearance means only one thing.

With all due apologies to Marvel Comics and its Fantastic Four, it is, in fact, clobbering time.

"I don't think he wants us to go inside," Batman says.

"Truly, you are the world's greatest detective," Superman replies.

Justice League Heroes brings together DC Comics' greatest comic book creations for an epic beat-'em-up. Its roster of superheroes reads like a who's who of funnybooks: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, Green Lantern, Green Arrow, Martian Manhunter, etc., and players will get to pair them up in two-man adventuring squads.

The game begins with the collection of a mysterious meteorite, and an invasion of robots in Superman's home city of Metropolis. The Justice League immediately summons its biggest guns, Superman and Batman, to defend the city and contain the invasion.

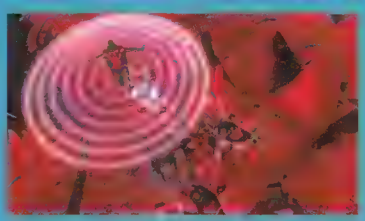
In this initial series of stages, players can swap back and forth between [illegible] up on the Xbox controller's directional pad. Players can also execute basic maneuvers on their A.I.-controlled partner with the pad; tapping down sets the hero to [illegible] attack mode, right to [illegible] attack, and left to a defensive alignment.

Each hero can execute [illegible] weak attacks with the B and A controller buttons, respectively. Flight and jumps are handled with the Y button, and X allows a character to pick up items. [illegible] Using physical [illegible] objects such as [illegible] car. Blocking is accomplished by pulling the Xbox controller's right trigger.

Superhuman abilities are accessed with the Xbox controller's left trigger. Green Lantern uses his power ring to create a protection dome to defend himself, can assault foes with a plasma bolt, giant verdant sledgehammer, or a series of grinding gears. He can also form a detention cell to trap enemies for a brief time; all these moves require the left trigger and either a button press or a tap of the right trigger to activate, and

"Justice League Heroes brings together DC Comics' greatest comic book creations for an epic beat-'em-up.

Martian Manhunter lays the [illegible]



camera perspective that can be modified

right analog stick.

getting around the fact that Heroes relies heavily on standard beat-'em-up elements. Light and heavy attacks can be strung together to create combinations, and players will frequently be slamming cars, hot dog stands, and mailboxes

would barely break a sweat fighting an army of robots; his superhuman speed,

endurance, strength, and invulnerability put him on a level far removed from any automaton.

Other sticking points present themselves at regular intervals. Flash normally runs at superhuman speeds; in Heroes, his increased velocity is only accessed as a superpower. Green Lantern's magical ring can create anything its user imagines, but the game limits him to a few basic forms. Why is Batman's Batarang considered a special ability? To be fair, it's difficult to capture an individual superhero's powers in the context of a video game, and near impossible to do so when said game has to deal with two superhuman characters of vastly different abilities on screen at one time. Heroes is a fine beat-'em-up with some nifty superheroes, but it's not, technically, a superhero game.

Get past the game's basic limitations, and it's smooth sailing. Players will get to battle such noted League foes as Brainiac, Gorilla Grodd, and The Key. When it comes time to storm Gorilla City, players will get to form their own two-man

teams, with one squad directed to assault an earthquake machine and the second to take the fight directly to Grodd himself.

Heroes' combat is absolutely fine, and both the game's story and RPG elements provide enough motivation for hammering on the game to its logical conclusion. The game also wins points for bringing characters such as Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, and Flash to the fore. It's nice to note, too, that in addition to the big guns, players can also take the role of lesser known heroes such as the magically inclined Zatanna and the archer Green Arrow. In short, there's plenty of justice to be had for all the heroes, great and small. **play**

[illegible]	PlayStation 2	[illegible]	Square Enix
[illegible]	Square Enix	Available	October

Final Fantasy XII

Casey Loe

Even in a series famous for reinventing itself, the changes in Final Fantasy XII may come as a shock to fans. While the usual Chocobo-and-airship window dressing is in plentiful supply, the fundamentals of visual style, game mechanics and story have surprisingly little in common with any previous game in the series.

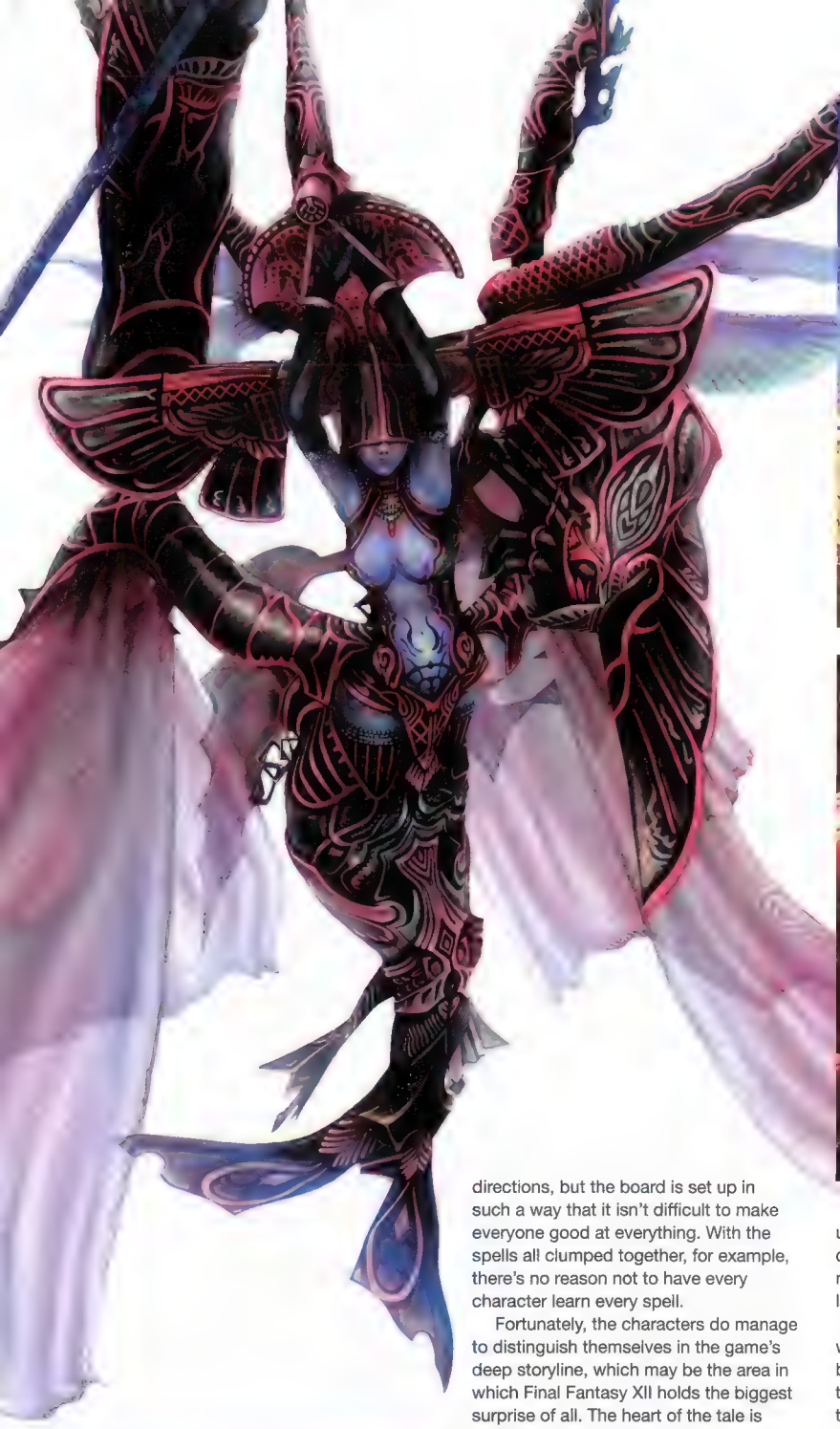
Where towns in past installments were home to a few dozen residents, FFXII's cities teem with thousands of digital souls. Where players in past games have traveled from cities to dungeons by selecting their destination from a map, FFXII fills in the gaps by providing mile upon scale mile of scorching deserts, frozen tundras and windswept plains to explore. The traditional Final Fantasy world map is gone, replaced by an actual *world*. That's a common trend in online games, of course, but FFXII's environments aren't the bland wastelands of FFXI; they easily match FFX for level of detail, despite a tenfold increase in quantity. While the level of detail may match, FFX's bright, colorful palette has been replaced here with gritty earth tones, giving the environments a look that borders at times on photorealism.

The characters share the same subdued tones and gritty, weathered edge, and the designs of even random townsfolk are exquisite. Akihiko Yoshida has always been a talented illustrator, but with Final Fantasy XII he has proven that he is also one of the most talented polygonal character designers in the industry. Your party looks fantastic at any polygon count, whether it's in combat, exquisitely detailed real-time cut scenes, or beautifully pre-rendered CG. Perhaps that's due to Yoshida's unconventional modeling style: he famously told Famitsu that he begins with each character's ass and models outward from there. It's not hard to believe, actually; their asses do look particularly fantastic. (I know I must sound like some creepy perv for focusing on that, but trust me—you'll see what I'm talking about when Fran suddenly backs up into the camera. Which, by the way, happens suspiciously often.)

The game's core battle and character development systems have been completely revamped as well, but it's here that the team's vision may run into some controversy. The abrupt random encounters of past installments have been scrapped, and all monsters now appear on the field. Players are encouraged to use the new "Gambit" system to automate combat by programming simple rules of behavior for each character. For example, you can set a character to cast a heal spell on any ally who falls below half their health. If no one qualifies, the character will move on to the next instruction, like attacking the nearest foe. Players may overrule the gambits to give their characters specific orders, but there isn't much point in doing that against the interminable streams of low-level enemies that fill most areas. The gambit system is a clever idea, but is watching the computer battle itself any more interesting than the repetitive random encounter system it replaced?

The character development system du jour is the "license board," in which you spend ability points earned in combat to buy stat boosts or permission to use new spells, equipment, and abilities. It's similar to Final Fantasy X's Sphere Grid but players are given the freedom to go in any direction they want (after all, making a beeline for the Holy spell won't help, since you're only buying permission to use it—the spell itself must be found elsewhere). Oddly, all six of the characters you recruit share the exact same board, making your party members completely interchangeable in combat. You could theoretically take them in different

"There is nothing remotely cute or whimsical about the tale; it is hard-edged, blood-soaked, and very political."



COMBAT LOG
Mesmenir F readies Kick.
Attack G Vaan HP 686 951 MP 95
Attack G Basch HP 712 969 MP 69
Attack G Penelo HP 602 833 MP 107

BOSS
Water G Balthier HP 521 727 MP 60
Attack G Basch HP 614 663 MP 54
Attack G Ashe HP 500 687 MP 74
Attack G Vossler HP 481 481 MP 58

directions, but the board is set up in such a way that it isn't difficult to make everyone good at everything. With the spells all clumped together, for example, there's no reason not to have every character learn every spell.

Fortunately, the characters do manage to distinguish themselves in the game's deep storyline, which may be the area in which Final Fantasy XII holds the biggest surprise of all. The heart of the tale is Ashe, a widowed queen whose kingdom was lost when a larger power invaded, forced it to surrender, and transformed it into a bulwark against the world's other super-power. Now Ashe leads an underground rebellion in a seemingly futile quest to bring peace and freedom to a nation that has become a pawn in a much larger conflict.

There is nothing remotely cute or whimsical about the tale; it is hard-edged, blood-soaked, and very political. For the first time ever in a Final Fantasy, the story is driven by well-realized human villains, acting with reasonable ideologies, not fantastical beings of pure evil. And at no point is the existence of the world in catastrophic peril—you care because you're invested in the fate of the characters, and no heavy-handed resurrection-of-the-dark-lord or world-destroying-meteor nonsense is necessary. If Final Fantasy XII was a novel, I'd read it, and that's something I wouldn't say about any other game in the series.

It's a drastic makeover, and it couldn't have come at better time. Final Fantasy XII is set to ship on Halloween, mere days before the high-profile PlayStation 3 and Wii launches. The stunning visuals, mature storyline and major play mechanics shifts are just what FFXII needs to stand out amidst the chaos. **play**

1/2

Sega Genesis Collection

Sega!

PlayStation 2, PSP

Sega

Digital Eclipse/Backbone

November

28 games on one PS2 disc: It's the Genesis motherload. The good news? 28 classic games, a few of them among the system's most memorable, are at your beck and call for one low price. The bad news? Memories are often a lot better than the cold hard reality of time. Let's break it down shall we?

Sonic 1&2, Vectorman 1 &2, Comix Zone, Decap Attack, Gain Ground, Phantasy Star II, III & IV, Golden Axe I, II, and III, Ristar, Shinobi III, the sappy Ecco trilogy, and I'll even give you Bonanza Bros. and Shadow Dancer, all stand the test of time (in different degrees). Super Thunder Blade, Altered Beast, Sword of Vermillion, Virtua Fighter 2, Columns, Flicky, Kid Chameleon, and Alex Kidd; ouch, pain, it burns, please make it stop. Of course Vectorman and Comix Zone are the stars of the show but hey, 20 fair-to-great games on one disc? Ka-ching! Next up I'd love to see Dynamite Headdy, McDonald's Treasure Land, Revenge of Shinobi, Streets of Rage trilogy unedited, DJ Boy unedited, Gunstar Heroes, Landstalker, Shining in the Darkness, Last Battle (Fist of the North Star) unedited, Aladdin, Quackshot, Castle of Illusion, Ranger X, E-Swat, and Wonder Boy IV: Monster World. Include these, Sega, and I'll mow your lawn. (Of course Sega has no lawn). Too bad Panorama Cotton wasn't published by Sega. **Dave Halverson**

Eagle Eye Golf

Grass stains

PlayStation 2

Aksys Games

Telenet

TBD

Author Mark Twain once described golf as a good walk spoiled. But even a curmudgeon like Twain would be hard-pressed to sneer at the Eagle Eye Golf.

Eagle Eye is cut in the same mold as the more cartoonish Hot Shots Golf. Its characters, certainly, wear funny hats and are generally goofy in their appearances. The game also contains some exaggerated effects such as spinning balls zooming to the game screen's foreground, as well as hyperbolic exclamations like "Good Shot!" when a ball is properly smacked. Yet it also features a Tiger Woods PGA Tour-style control scheme in terms of making shots; players draw the PlayStation 2 controller's right analog stick back to start up a power meter (determining the distance a shot will travel) and then push it forward to make a swing. Pushing the stick up straight ensures a ball will fly true to its target. Deviation means the ball will hook or slice to the left or right.

The game allows for both character and course creation, and lets up to four players, ahem, whack away at balls. There's also support for tournaments and a survival mode that ensures only the fittest duffers make it to the next round. **Eric Patterson**

A Sweeping Saga

An Ancient Betrayal

A Battle To End All Battles

INTENSE ACTION

IMMERSIVE BATTLES

MATURE 17+ M Violence ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Q?

—PHANTAGRAM—

ONLY ON XBOX 360

XBOX 360

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Reservoir Dogs

Color them killers

PS2, PC, Xbox
Eidos

Volatile/SCI
October

The video game for Quentin Tarantino's ultraviolent crime epic Reservoir Dogs may not look like much—and this is being kind—but its take on action-based gunplay is rather novel.

The smart criminals here won't go for ball-out gunfighting, even though the game more than makes allowances for such. It's oftentimes best to take hostages, using suckers as bullet shields. With a hostage in tow, players can command civilians, security guards, and cops to freeze, drop their weapons if they have one, and face a nearby wall (thus neutralizing them). It's also possible, while toting a hostage, to command characters by pointing a gun at them and ordering them to move to specific places in order to unlock doors or open safes. The game tracks a player's performance; too many dead hostages earns the rating "psychopath," while a clean run though a level nets "professional."

Eidos promises Dogs will remain truthful to the film's plot, and fill in some of its blanks. It certainly intends, also, to keep intact the movie's violent disposition, so much so that Australia and New Zealand have refused to classify the game or outright banned Dogs from being sold, respectively. **Greg Orlando**

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

Future Legend

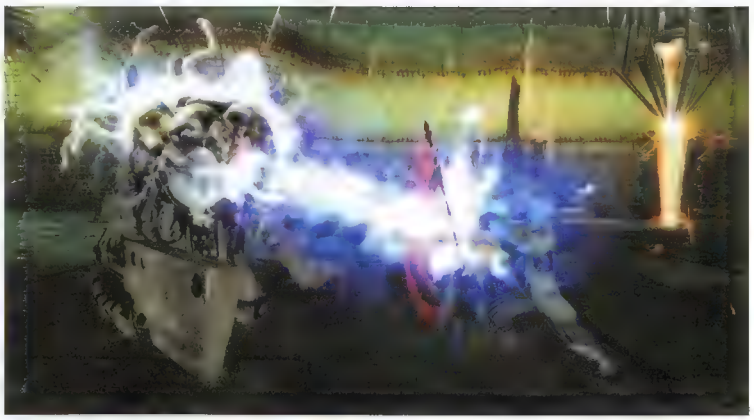
PS3
SOE

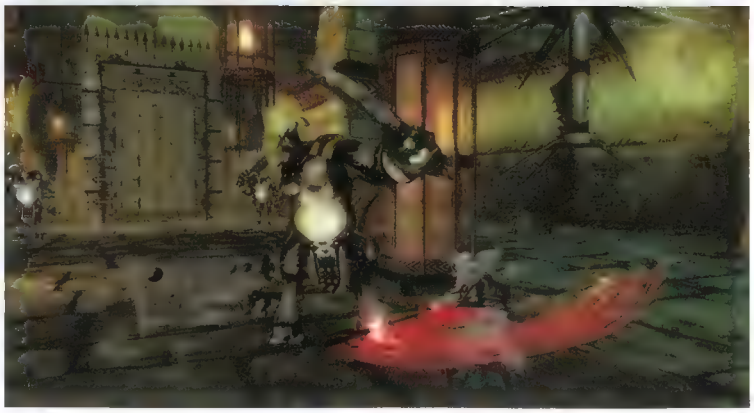
SOE
November

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom takes the top-down concept of action-RPGs—think the classics like Baldur's Gate—and applies the power of PS3 to bring the perspective behind the characters for a more visually open experience. Three characters—three extremely animated characters with outfits that blow in the wind with a holy-crap-that-is-awesome physical realism—take the hero stage: a mage, a warrior, and a scout. Each of course offers their own unique combination of powers, attacks, strengths and weaknesses. A branching experience system allows you to place your own stamp of progression on their growth, following the basic functionalities you've come to expect from the genre.

The levels carry the fantasy vibe, from dungeons to forests to villages bathed in rich, ethereal sunlight. In battle, the depiction of your brutal duties is handled with the kind of visual details we're not normally used to, with little physical extras like skeleton parts bouncing around under water as the characters do battle, waves collecting all around their movements; a lot of emphasis has been placed on physics coding.

With a game like Dark Kingdom, you have to take into account the elevated appeal of multiplayer. Here you can play two-player on the same PS3, or go online with three other characters. A few modes outside the main adventure are also being implemented. **Brady Fiechter**



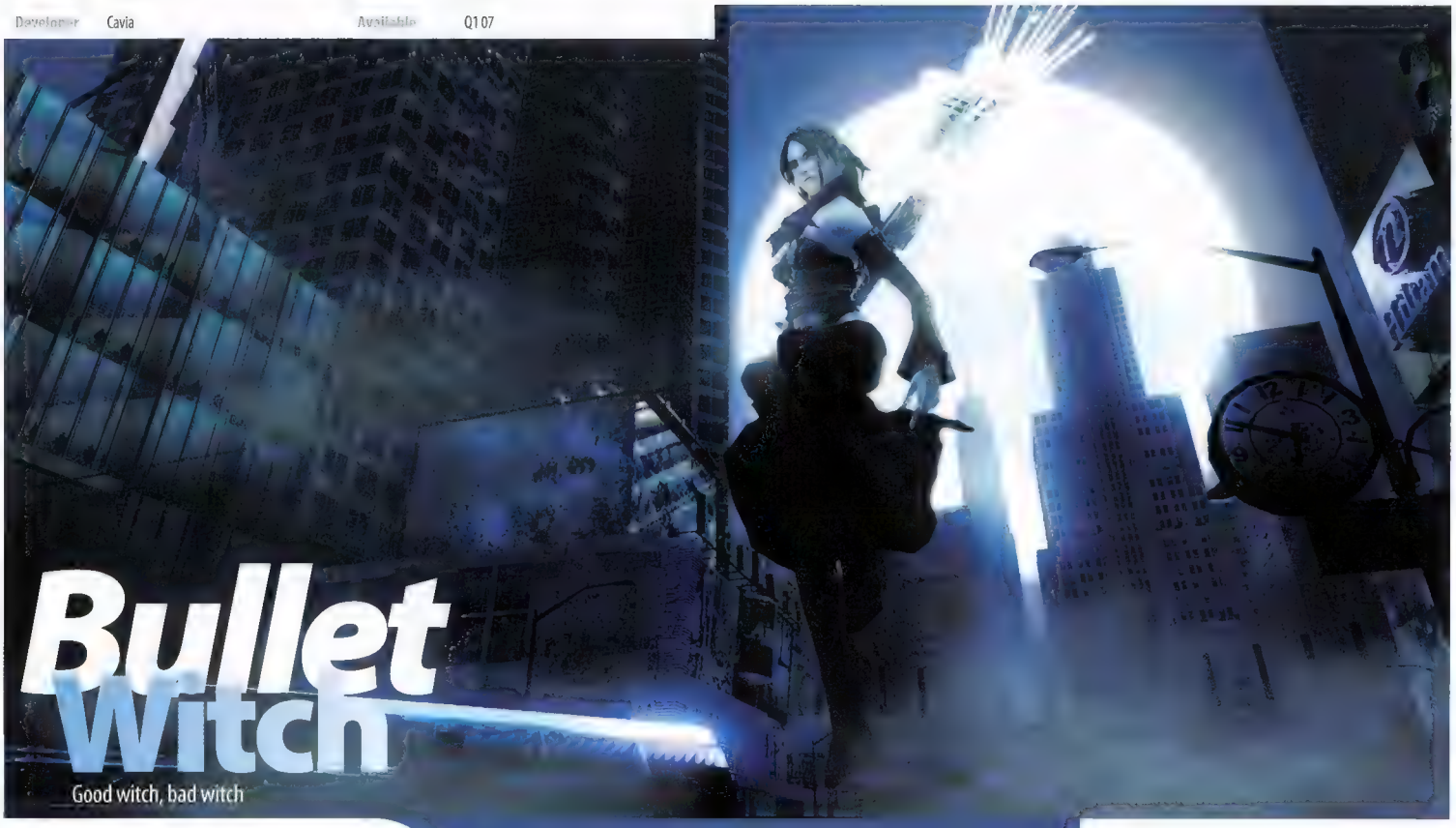


Systems: Xbox 360
Developer: Cavia
Publisher: Atari, Inc.
Available: Q1 07

Bullet Witch

Good witch, bad witch

Dave Halverson



It's a great time to be on heroine.

If the first game out of the newly forged relationship between Japan's AQ Interactive Inc. and Atari is a sign of things to come, then Atari is in for some much deserved smooth sailing (although I would love a 360/PS3 Godzilla game). Whenever you put together neo-apocalyptic action and leggy witches, sign me up.

Designed by Cavia (creators of the underrated Ghost in the Shell SAC for PS2), Bullet Witch is set on a bleak planet Earth in the year 2013, with humanity on the brink of extinction (shoulda listened to AG), plagued by scores of flesh-hungry demons. Humanity's last hope? Here's a hint: Magical skills, lightning-fast trigger finger, hot body. While the gameplay—riding on an advanced physics engine showcasing environmental damage, explosion and destruction—is most reminiscent of Devil May Cry, the character design is inspired by American and Japanese horror and fantasy monsters: an interesting combo for sure. News out of Japan, where the game has already been released, is positive so let the bewitching begin. **play**

> "While the gameplay is most reminiscent of Devil May Cry, the character design is inspired by American and Japanese horror and fantasy monsters..."

Turok

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Buena Vista Games
Developer	Propaganda Games	**Available**	2007

In honor of the Leipzig GC held in Germany we present this Turok PS3/360 update In German! Dunkle, raue Science-Fiction-Welt, die durch modernstes Game-Design, hoch auflösende Grafik und einen realistischen Sound beeindruckend in Szene gesetzt wird. Loosely translated: Science-fiction meets dinosaurs meets great game design with really cool sound and amazing graphics. ***DH***

Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire

System(s)	PlayStation 3	**Publisher**	Namco Bandai Games
Developer	BEC	**Available**	November

Whether you join the Federation Army to repel the invading Zeon forces or pledge your allegiance to Zeon to claim the Earth, one thing is for sure, you're going to war boy, in a big ass mobile suit! Not only that…you're squad leader! Smoke if you got 'em! ***DH***

Avatar: The Last Airbender

System(s)	PS2, Xbox, GC, Wii, PC	**Publisher**	THQ
Developer	THQ Studios Australia	**Available**	November

Based on the Nickelodeon anime-tion series, Avatar: The Last Airbender lets you play as Aang, Katara, Sokka and Haru, adopting and evolving the bending arts as you drive back the merciless Fire Nation and the evil Prince Zuko. ***DH***

Project H.A.M.M.E.R

System(s)	Wii	**Publisher**	Nintendo
Developer	Nintendo Software Technology Corp.	**Available**	TBA

Killer robots are attacking major cities across the United States, and the military is powerless to stop them. Time to grab the Wii remote and do something about it. Using the remote in one hand and the nunchuk in the other, players (that's you people) will swing away just like a real hammer to control the hero's mighty mallet. Swing the controller side to side to send enemies flying or lift it into the air and bring it down to smash 'em all. ***DH***

Coded Arms Assault

System(s)	PlayStation 3	**Publisher**	Konami
Developer	Konami	**Available**	November

In CAA players take on the role of a hacker entering a virtual world in an attempt to overthrow an evil corporation bent on world chaos…Paging Bruce Boxleitner. Within the intelligent evolving storyline, players will take on fearsome enemies, unleash deadly viruses, jump into rugged vehicles and download new weapons as they fight to bring down the biggest threat since the Soul Patrol. Powered by the Unreal Engine 3, the entire campaign mode of the game can be played solo or online cooperatively with up to four players. ***DH***

Full Auto 2

System(s)	PlayStation 3	**Publisher**	Sega
Developer	Pseudo Int.	**Available**	November

Combat-enhanced and fully redesigned FA2 features 25 different vehicles ranging from classic muscle cars and low riders to monstrous SUVs and industrial vehicles, each of which can be customized with more than 20 explosive weapons as well as multiple paint schemes and wheel styles. 20 tracks, a new multi-path single-player campaign, and six multiplayer modes promise a smashing good time. ***DH***

Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles

System(s)	PlayStation 2	**Publisher**	Namco Bandai Games
Developer	Cavia	**Available**	Q4

Can this be? A popular anime-based video game that's not vs. fighting?! Yes! And it's Naruto! This single-player 3D Adventure (!) features an original story as Naruto uncovers a plot against the Hidden Leaf Village; strategy-based character customization, story-driven missions, partner assist, and of course lethal Ninjitsu attacks straight from the series. Hard to believe it! ***DH***

Spongebob Squarepants: Creature from the Krusty Krab

System(s)	PlayStation 2, GameCube, Wii, PC	**Publisher**	THQ
Developer	Blitz Games	**Available**	November

THQ hasn't shown a whole lot of actual gameplay yet on their Blitz-developed Krusty Krab…hmmm, no Heavy Iron (*concern) but it would seem quite obvious that while it's multi-console-bound as to absorb maximum cash, it is being fitted for a Wii-lee good time. ***DH***

Viva Piñata

Grab a stick: It's Viva TV! ...Only make mine analog please.

W

thanks to the minds that brought us the

that dream can finally become a reality.

stop at a mere video game where kids

Roz Nowicki, Senior Vice President, Marketing & Licensing, 4Kids Entertainment on the impending phenom' that is Viva Piñata!

Dave Halverson

"...the Viva Piñata universe lends itself perfectly to a TV show."

~Roz Nowicki, Senior Vice President, Marketing & Licensing, 4Kids Entertainment

How did the union of piñata farming and a TV show come about? What came first, the piñata or the pilot?
Viva Piñata started life as a simple experimental concept at Rare Ltd. called "Your Garden," where players could attract different animals to their garden and then trade them with their friends. This concept evolved into the game, where the player takes control of Piñata Island's former premier garden and piñata provider, now sadly piñata-less and gone to ruin. The player must rebuild his garden from scratch, whichever way they choose, working out how to attract more than 60 different species of piñata back. Only then will their garden be the pride of Piñata Island again.
Based on 4Kids' expertise as the licensing agent for Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh!, Microsoft turned to us to expand the videogame concept into a TV show and franchise.

From what we've seen of the game, the basic premise seems to be a personalized habitat where you breed and care for your very own piñata creatures. How does this evolve into a show? Do certain piñatas emerge as lead characters?
As in the videogame, the Viva Piñata TV show takes place on Piñata Island. It focuses more on the friendships between the piñatas and the fun they have living on Piñata Island. Each episode, which begins airing on Saturday mornings on 4Kids TV on FOX on September 9, takes them on a new adventure. During the animated series, viewers will be able to gain insight as to how the piñata characters and breeds may react to situations – and their reactions and outcomes will be similar to how the game may play out.
With over 60 different piñata species, each with a unique name and set of personal characteristics and abilities, and more species being discovered all the time, the Viva Piñata universe lends itself perfectly to a TV show. Some of the recurring characters will include Fergy Fudgehog, Paulie Pretztail, Franklin Fizzlybear and Hudson Horstachio, among others. Of course, viewers will be introduced to new characters weekly that will share the storylines with the established characters.

Who is actually producing the show? Does it utilize Rare's models or will the series look slightly different?

4Kids Productions will produce the show. It will be a unique 3-D, CG-animated series that will be one of the most vibrant and innovative offerings on TV this Fall.

Who's writing?
The Viva Piñata TV show is being written by writers affiliated with 4Kids Productions. They are working closely with Rare to ensure that the show honors the creators' comedic sensibilities and irreverent humor.

The special effects hit strong and often.

So does the show bridge the gap between kids and adults?
While Viva Piñata is a show designed for kids 6-11, we are confident that adults will like it as well. There is a quirky irreverence to the show that will not be lost on adults. The show is quite humorous, with jokes appropriate for viewers of all ages.

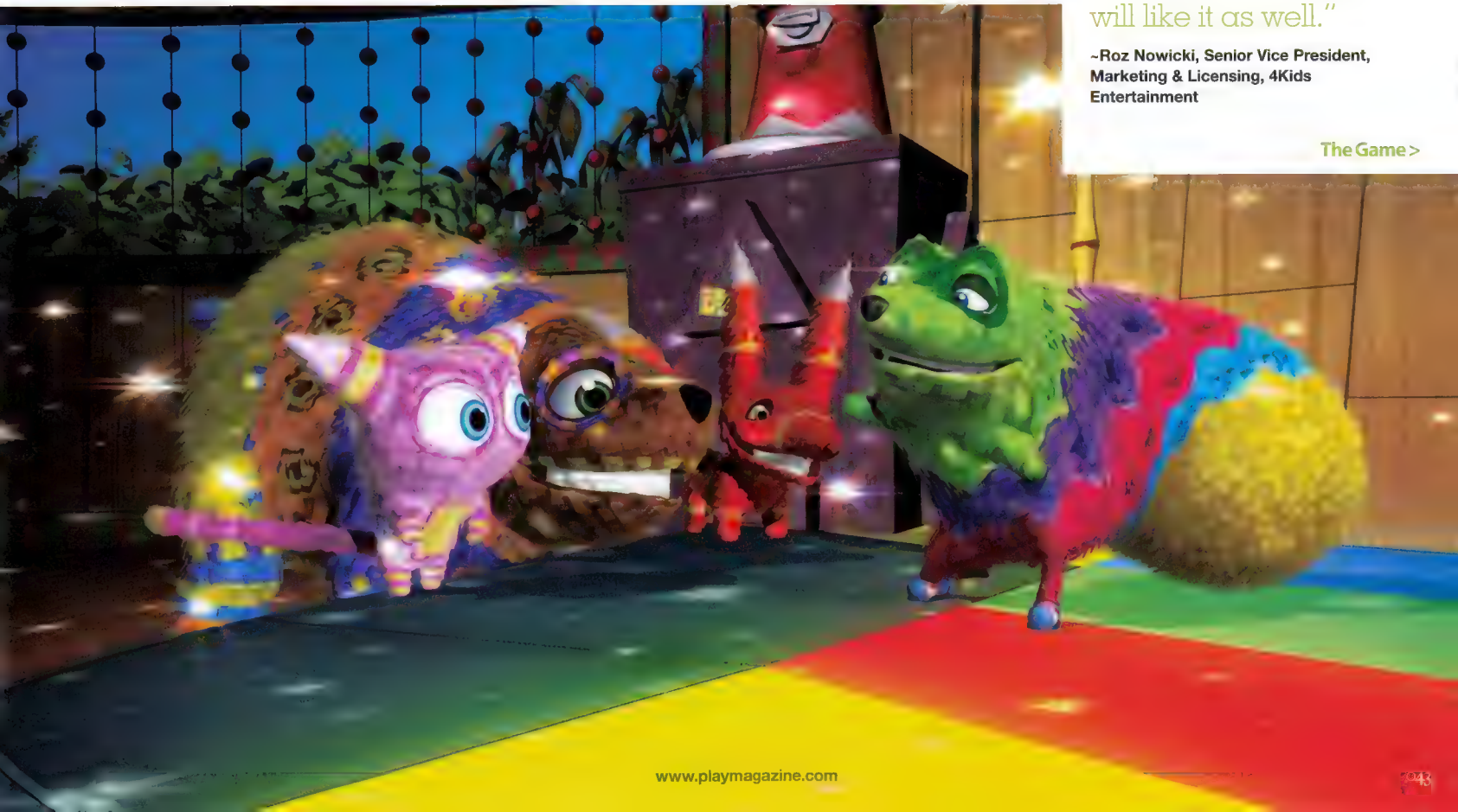
What about merchandise?
The merchandising program for Viva Piñata will kick off in November with the launch of the videogame from Microsoft. Licensees are very excited about this property and we expect a full line to debut en masse in fall 2007. We expect to announce a master toy licensee shortly, followed by products in other categories, including party goods and apparel.

Do the piñatas occupy a "universe" similar to Bikini Bottom or does the show stick to natural environs?
The show takes place in the exclusive world of Piñata Island. You'd be hard-pressed to find it in a world atlas! The characters are unaware that a "real world" exists beyond their garden universe and their piñata friends.

"While Viva Piñata is a show designed for kids 6-11, we are confident that adults will like it as well."

~Roz Nowicki, Senior Vice President, Marketing & Licensing, 4Kids Entertainment

The Game >



Viva Piñata

A Rare opportunity

[illegible]	Xbox 360	[illegible]	Microsoft
[illegible]	Rare	[illegible]	October

How did the union of Piñata farming and a TV show come about? What came first the Piñata or the pilot?
The core idea behind Viva Piñata the game has been around for at least four years on one system or another, so development had been ongoing for some time before MGS approached 4Kids with the idea of spinning it off into a TV show. We always knew the basic kind of game we wanted, with the personalised garden full of animals that you could customise and trade, and we stumbled onto the actual piñata theme almost by accident – but we soon realised it worked, and as things progressed MGS and 4Kids saw the makings of an animated series in there too.

From what we've seen of the game the basic premise seems to be a personalized habitat where you breed and care for your Piñata creatures. How does this evolve into a show? Do certain Piñatas emerge as lead characters?
More so in the show than the game, as each has had to take a different direction to play more to the strengths of the format. Rare knows games and 4Kids knows TV, so we try not to step on each others' toes too much. We do get to work closely with them on the scripts and in ensuring that the Piñata Island setting and inhabitants are consistent, but beyond that we're happy for 4Kids to have free rein to do whatever it takes to create a winning show.

In the game, once you've maxed out the area and built your ultimate farm how does the gameplay evolve? Does it become a matter of regular maintenance like a Nintendog?

In some ways, yes – you have to keep up some level of maintenance if you don't want the place to get overgrown and uninhabitable and your Piñatas to get ill. But you can hire in-game Helpers to deal with that if you want to concentrate on other things.
The customization is ongoing, as even after the story behind the game has been wrapped up, you can still take on challenges from Piñata Central (the in-game Piñata distribution centre), try to find new and exotic species, compete for new player titles, match the value of your garden against those of your friends and on the global Leaderboards…

I would imagine there must be an ambitious "Live" element in the wings – especially if the show takes off. Will you grow the game on Xbox Live?
For downloadable content, we'll have accessories available on Marketplace from day one, and you can be sure that we've got big plans for future content and features. Xbox Live will allow us to introduce competitions and cooperative features where one player can visit (or be visited by) another, with or without their tools and the ability to pitch in and affect the development of the garden. We don't want the non-Live gamers to feel like they're missing out, so there's nothing on Live that's absolutely essential to the game, but at the same time it does offer a load of gameplay possibilities that we just can't ignore.

Does the show/game bridge the gap between kids and adults like a Shrek or Billy and Mandy or is it strictly for young kids? Rare games are known for their sharp wit.
There are a lot of Banjo and Ghoulies veterans on the team, so there's always the possibility of hidden gags and references. However, we've tried to balance Viva Piñata in terms of gameplay to offer plenty of challenge for experienced gamers while keeping it accessible to newcomers and younger players.

Does Conker make a cameo? We all know how he likes to relieve himself in public….
I'm not sure Piñata Island is really his kind of place! Ibiza, maybe… **play**

> "Rare knows games and 4Kids knows TV, so we try not to step on each others' toes too much."

Piñatas: They're not just for beating anymore.

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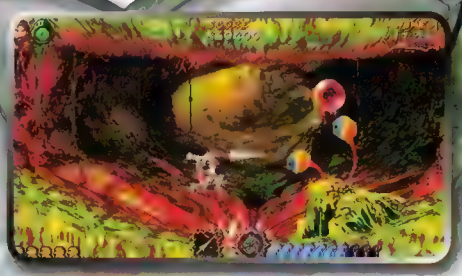

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Art: Dany Orizio

Best-of series Part 2

ADVENTURE

Dave Halverson

modus operandi

Tricks of the trade

- Uninterested in any object that doesn't sparkle, twinkle, or glow.
- Able to conceal large quantities of food and supplies
- Superhuman finger strength
- Keys: Every key fits any lock, and breaks after being used once. NEVER QUESTION THIS! They didn't understand the basic concepts of security in medieval times, okay?
- Bombs: Why mess around? When true adventurers hit a dead end, explosives are always a first resort.
- Treasure Chests: In the days of yore, monsters built proper gold-plated, red velvet-lined treasure chests for every item they owned. You won't see that sort of craftsmanship in Grand Theft Auto!
- Super healing powers
- Knows to keep the lamp on to keep the grues at bay.
- Shoulders 35-percent stronger than average human's from pushing statues, crates, etc.
- Has magpie tendencies

Combined play staff Top 25

play

[redacted] (GC) Capcom
The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (N64) Nintendo
Castlevania: Symphony of the Night (PS) Konami
The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past (SNES) Nintendo
ICO (PS2) SCEI
Shadow of the Colossus (PS2) SCEI
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath (Xbox) Oddworld Inhabitants
God of War (PS2) SCEA Santa Monica
Silent Hill 2 (PS2) Konami
Okami* (PS2) Capcom
Super Metroid (SNES) Nintendo
Grim Fandango (PC) LucasArts
Ys Book I&II (TG-16 CD) Falcom/Hudson
Silent Hill (PS) Konami
Tomb Raider 2 (PS) Core Design
Policenauts (Saturn) Konami
Zork (PC/Mac) Infocom
Sam & Max Hit the Road (PC/Mac) LucasArts
Tomb Raider (PS) Core Design
Shenmue (Dreamcast) Sega AM2
Metal Gear Solid (PS) Konami
Fable (Xbox) Big Blue Box
Secret of Mana (SNES) Square
Beyond Good & Evil (Xbox) Ubisoft
Primal (PS2) SCEE Cambridge Studios

*As of press time only 3 of 7 editors had played Okami

This was a tough category to pin down, but after veering in and out of the action-RPG lane for a few miles, we finally arrived at a solid enough definition of "adventure" to get the job done, in the wake of an increasingly nebulous genre. Saving the active battle systems of Vagrant Story, .hack, Star Ocean, etc. for the upcoming RPG special, we tried to stick to story/narrative-driven action with evolving characters and/or play mechanics, exploration, and puzzle elements.

Dave Halverson
Top Ten

[redacted]

Casey Loe
Top Ten

[redacted]

Nick Des Barres
Top Ten

[redacted]

Brady Fiechter
Top Ten

[redacted]

Greg Orlando
Top Ten

[redacted]

Heather Campbell
Top Ten

[redacted]

Eric Patterson
Top Ten

[redacted]

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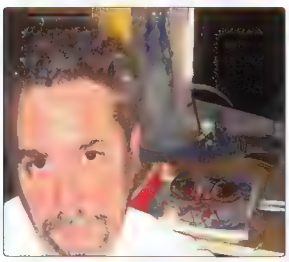


Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action , racing, RPGs, and open-world
Now playing: Okami, Death Jr. 2, Castlevania: PoR, .hack//G.U.
I could do without: The death of independent studios and with them the original content that once fueled the industry.

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Dead Rising, F.E.A.R, Call of Duty 3
I could do without: The perception that a short game can't be a great game.

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

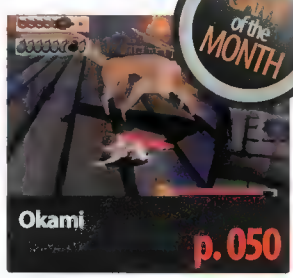
Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Yakuza, Gangs of London
I could do without: Sweat physics and enemies with heads for weak spots.

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Warhammer MoC, ArchLord, Guild Wars, Infernal, Mage Knight Apocalypse
I could do without: Interfaces that require more attention than the on-screen action.

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



The play rating system

10 Perfect
9 Extraordinary
8 Great
7 Good
6 Decent
5 Average
4 Below average
3 Poor
2 Bad
1 Terrible

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: FF III, Melty Blood
I could do without: Japanese 3rd parties thinking they have to imitate "urban" themed games to sell software in America.

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

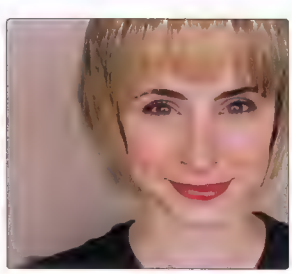
Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: FF XII, Tales of the Abyss
I could do without: Randomly generated content in games (playing levels multiple times that weren't fun in the first place).

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Rhythm Tengoku
I could do without: Multi-player games that aren't playable online...especially fighters.

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: Contact, Cave Story
I could do without: Crates filled with supplies and ammo.

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Axtec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Star Fox Command
I could do without: Crappy head models

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom (Clover)	Online/Multi	
		Available	September 19
		Rating	Teen

OKAMI

words **Dave Halverson**

Twilight Princess has taken too long. Nintendo's decision to transform it into a dual console release to jettison the Wii out of the gate might have been the shrewd thing to do, but for this Zelda fan—and I'm card-carrying—the sell-by date has just expired. Am I saying that Okami out-Zeldas Zelda? Not just yet...but it's possible. Not that everyone with a pulse shouldn't play both but Okami is definitely the freshest and most deserving game of the two.

The sad thing is that if history repeats itself most people will never play it. In this superficial age of graphics over gameplay where first-person realistic violence rules the day, a game like Okami is almost a lost cause—a specter of gaming's past when gameplay, real emotion, and imagination ruled the day. Clover has given the world caviar in a time when it seems to want pork rinds. Not to say that there isn't a large enough contingent left to make Okami a hit. There definitely is, although, they've been increasingly hard to rally. All I can say is that if you don't come out for Okami it's time to hang up the controller. Video games, no matter how powerful the hardware, do not get any better than this. Soon after you begin playing Okami it hits you like a ton of bricks: chasing technology is meaningless. True art is achieved through technique and the truly visionary. Nothing on "next-gen" even comes close to Okami. Not in appearance, not in execution, and certainly not in heart, a commodity it gives willingly.

The 50-plus-hour adventure begins in Kamiki Village; a peaceful hamlet in a grove of cherry blossoms honored as gods where a dark secret is about to come undone. To appease Orochi, an 8-headed beast with blood-red eyes and a lethal gaze no one dared disobey, a fair maiden was sacrificed each year to preserve the peace. However,

> "Clover has given the world caviar in a time when it seems to want pork rinds."

this year on the night of the offering a strange white wolf appeared to patrol the streets. Presuming the wolf they deemed Shiranui was a familiar of Orochi, a villager, Nagi, confronted the wolf but his attacks were in vein against its nimble refrain.

That night the white arrow fired to choose the sacrifice hit Nami – the village's most beautiful maiden, who Nagi secretly loved. Enraged, he traveled to the cave in her place and confronted Orochi; however, after hours of slashing with his sword he hadn't even made a scratch. Coming to his aid, Shiranui battled Orochi until he too lay lifeless and bloodied, but just as Orichi was about to deal the fatal blow, the moon caught Nagi's sword and gave him the power to slice off all 8 heads… the curse was lifted. Nagi carried the limp wolf's body back to the village but it was too late. A shrine was created in Shiranui's honor and Nagi's sword, christened Tsukuyomi, was placed inside the moon cave.

In the interest of space, 100 years have passed; the sword has been pulled from the stone and evil has returned. Kamiki Village's guardian, a beautiful wood sprite named Sakuya appears before the Shiranui shrine and calls forth the Mother and origin of all, Okami Amaterasu…Just then, Issun—a wandering artist that resembles a 1-inch tall bug with a beetle on its head—hops out of Sakuya's kimono and makes your acquaintance. You will hereafter be referred to as either "Ammy" or "Furball"; time to restore all of Nippon. Where there is evil there is a barrier of blackness o'er the land that can only be restored by using your celestial brush to paint a circle around Guardian Saplings and repair the land, and thusly the journey begins.

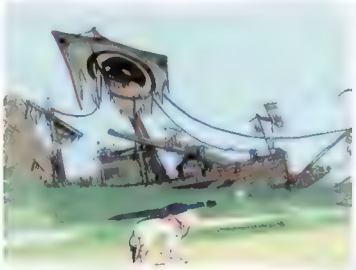
Here's where it gets tricky. I took notes for the first 20 hours of Okami before realizing it was a futile if not malevolent endeavor. The game has numerous systems and endless functionality. To sit here and spout about so much discovery would be to rob you of the experience I am having. So I'll make it simple: Did you like Ocarina of Time? If so just imagine that type of gameplay only bigger and better in every way, along with the ability to draw your own bombs, kill and finish-off enemies (need those fangs) with a stroke of your brush, conjure the sun, call on vines to whisk you away, slice through barriers and even repair the topography. The celestial brush is an absolute godsend. As you free guardian spirits, new techniques are forged, creating that wonderful sense of adventure where you pass a bit of the game you can't breach knowing that you will return to see what's inside—and oh how immense and glorious Nippon is.

Having Issun around doesn't hurt either. When the game's off I often wish he was still bouncing on my nose. The people you meet (…Flaming Pyrotechnist Tama, Bone Reader Madame Fawn, Tao Master

Waka--God's gift to man!, Boy of the Forest Kokari...) are eccentric and fantastical beyond measure, the places and situations are the stuff of gaming legend, the music brain-tickling, and the gameplay all around sheer perfection, and then some. There's no end to the ingenious devices learned and utilized throughout the game, from the adventuring to the combat, concealed within scrolls floating in the ether. Much like an action-RPG (and exactly like .hack// G.U.) monsters appear on the field for you to either engage or avoid. When Amaterasu breaches their space, a dome appears and the game's ornate ancient Japanese phantoms materialize. Amaterasu can use a number of skills in battle (more numerous as the game progresses) one as a main attack and one as the sub, nimbly jumping and striking until enemies grow weak and turn black and white briefly giving you the opportunity to freeze the frame and use the Tachigami power slash or any other number of techniques depending on the situation to send them back from whence they came. The fighting is so nuanced and altogether joyous it never gets old for a second, and the bosses are simply stunning. Like I said, Zelda only better.

How ironic that Link takes on wolf form in Twilight Princess. I love you Link and I always will but my new best friend is a breed apart. **play**

"There's no end to the ingenious devices learned and utilized throughout the game..."



You'll not find a more mystical brood of deviants anywhere.

System(s)	Xbox360, XB, PS2, GC, PSP, NDS, GBA, PC	Publisher	LucasArts	Available	Now
Developer	Traveller's Tales	Online/Multi	2-player	ESRB Rating	E

Lego Star Wars II
The Original Trilogy

words [redacted]

The blockheads have taken over, and it's absolutely fine. It's one of the video game industry's great strengths that it can sometimes find inspiration in the unlikeliest of places and in the most Bizarro World-nutsiest of fusions; It may well have been someone's drug-fueled dream that lead to the merging of the Star Wars universe and Lego toys, but it works.

More appropriately, in this case, it fits.

With Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy, players get to relive George Lucas' good Star Wars films: A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back, and Return of the Jedi. Each of the films is broken down into six different chapters, with all of the classic moments captured in the third-person perspective as, alternately, a shooting-heavy action platformer or vehicle-based blast-'em-up. The game's roster of playable heroes, bit players, and villains is prodigious—from whiny farm nerd Luke Skywalker to the lowly Gonk droid, players will have access to just about every one of the trilogy's cast. Each character is rendered with Lego's trademark blockiness and, this time around, all of the characters (save for the nonaggressive droids) possess both a ranged and melee attack.

It's a whimsical romp, Lego Star Wars II. At one point, players unlock a door and rush in to a room to find a group of Stormtroopers, wearing only their trademark white helmets and Speedos, lounging in a hot tub. The game never worries about presenting absurdities to the player or lets its reverence for the source material get in the way of a good sight gag. The freewheeling, devilishly impish nature of II reveals itself regularly, whether it's in the tiny moments (robotic bounty hunter IG-88 removing its head to strike foes) or in its more grand happenings.

Almost every inanimate object can be blown up or destroyed with laser blasts, lightsaber strokes, force powers, or thermal grenades. In this destructible world, it's hard to take anything seriously when everything is exploding, sending out colored shiny bits in great quantities. At times, in fact, it seems as if even the game's title should be changed to Wacky Collection of Stuff That Blows Up Real Good and Sprays Doodads. Properly collected, the colorful currency can be taken back to Mos Eisley cantina, the game's central hub, and redeemed for cheats, unlockable characters, and other goodies.

The game's overwhelming charm and humor serve to soften the blow when, say, there's yet another block to be pushed from A to B or when the vehicle-based missions prove to be considerably less interesting and more hard to control than the on-foot ones. Children, ostensibly the game's target audience, may find the game too difficult in spots, but again, II's oddball nature, coupled with an accessible gameplay system where players can hop around to different challenges almost at will, proves ultimately medicinal.

And, were it not said, someone would be drummed out of the union: The Force is strong with this one. **play**

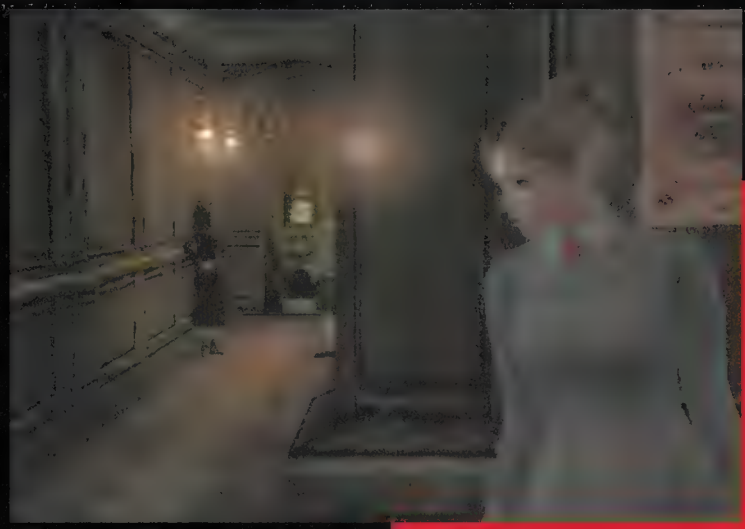
> "Almost every inanimate object can be blown up or destroyed with laser blasts, lightsaber strokes, force powers..."

Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

score 8.5

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Atlus	Available	September 2006
Developer	Punchline/Shirogumi	Online Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Mature

Kids kill the damdest things



Trouble in the hallway

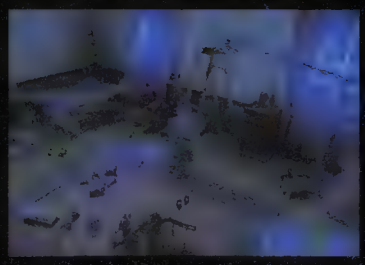
words **Eric Patterson**

Way back in 1999, I got my first taste of Konami's new horror series Silent Hill. While the mechanics behind the game itself weren't of the utmost quality, all of the story-line elements had been crafted with such care and dedication that Silent Hill was no longer a game, but a mental and emotional experience. I bring this up because my introduction to Rule of Rose brought up many of the exact same feelings. Not since the tale of Harry Mason and the search for his lost daughter has a horror title so perfectly, yet so seemingly easily, created an entire universe and mythos that clicks from the very moment it begins.

We first meet our protagonist Jennifer sitting alone on a bus, on her way to a far-off orphanage after her parents die in a tragic accident. As we follow her descent into the nightmare world that awaits her upon her arrival, every step that she takes, every orphan she encounters, every location she explores alone or with Brown, the dirty mutt she befriends, it all feels less like a jumble of polygons and textures, and more like a glimpse into a world that actually exists in some far off place. One example of just how well crafted Rule of Rose is would be the "villains" of the game, a group of four young girls calling themselves the Red Crayon Aristocrats. Rule of Rose isn't scary because its mischievous kids are acting like hell-born demons or murderous adults, as in stereotypical Hollywood horror flicks, but because it has children being children at their worst. The torment and abuse Jennifer receives throughout the game comes from the fact that children, when left to their own devices, can be the most cruel and mean-spirited beings to walk the Earth.

Unfortunately, much like the original Silent Hill, Rule of Rose's gameplay then fails its other elements, except the breakdown here is much worse. The game's combat engine feels like a last minute addition tacked on in a rush; when the first monsters finally appear, you'll wish the developers had forgone combat and instead crafted the story around puzzles and expanded character interaction. Jennifer's first means of self defense is a simple kitchen fork, and not only must she stand right next to her opponents in order to hit them, she swings the fork blindly while covering her eyes with her free hand. Better weapons follow, but hit detection remains stuck at the level of "God-awful." Your enemies, meanwhile, seem to have no trouble hitting you, especially from unfair distances.

> "Rule of Rose isn't scary because its mischievous kids are acting like hell-born demons or murderous adults..."



Rule of Rose is one of the hardest reviews I've had to do during my time at **play**. I really wanted to give it a higher score, but just can't. Atlus deserves major love for being brave enough to bring this our way, because it really is one of the most amazing and dramatic titles I've played in years. I think everyone should experience this game, especially horror fans, but in order to do so, you're going to have to suffer through times of sheer agony–just like poor, unlucky Jennifer.

Rule of Rose score **7.5**

System(s)	PS2, Xbox, GC	Publisher	Sierra Games	Available	October 10
Developer	Krome Studios	Online Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Legend of Spyro

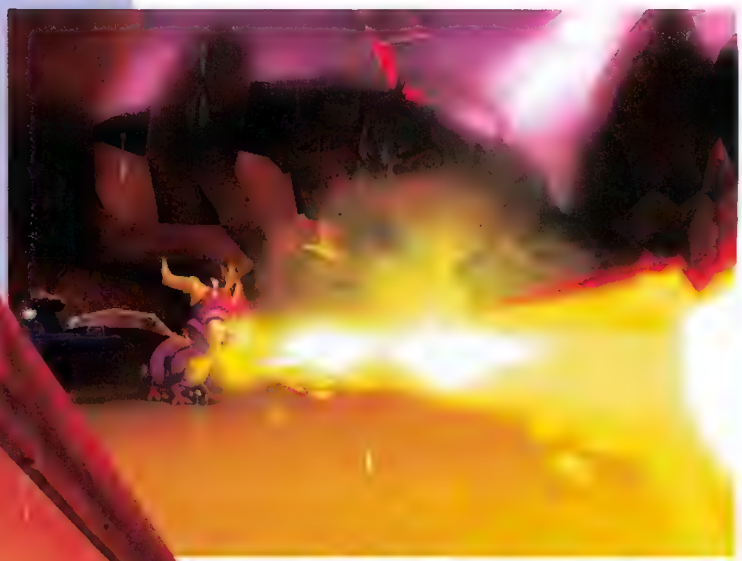
A New Beginning

Down under dragon

words **Dave Halverson**

Battered, black and blue (and of course purple) from chronic brand abuse, Spyro laid dormant, puffing faint smoke rings in a flat-shaded pastel graveyard. ...After rubbing up against the fruitiest posse in E-land, could Insomniac's regal little dragon somehow be revived?

"Surely we cannot go forward" his keepers likely thought, "we've green-lit so many toddler-friendly spin-offs the thing shits Skittles!" And so they reached across the globe to...Australia? While Ty's on walkabout, Krome's grown plenty big enough to take Spyro under their wing (on top of HellBoy, their top secret first next-gen game, and then I'm told the next Ty). But it's easier said than done to continue a tradition so many have left their imprint on, so Krome wisely decided to start from scratch, giving Spyro a much needed rite of passage while absolving him of his cute 'n fuzzy duties as platforming's prodigal wimp. The Aussie-bred Spyro (engagingly voiced by Elijah Wood) may be small, but he's an extremely volatile little creature. He's still as cute as a big-eyed bunny but he fights like a Tasmanian devil. And you can forget the cuddly sidekicks and vanilla enemies. His brother Sparks is a wise-cracking dragonfly voiced by David Spade—peculiar yes, cute no—and his enemies a gaggle of demonic spirits and strangely evolved baboons that fly on wicked giant bats and ride the backs of iron bugs in service of Cynder, the evil she-dragon responsible for Spyro's abandonment, the desecration of his land and the imprisonment of his ancestors, whom he must free in order to gain the power



A rare moment of calm in the otherwise unfriendly skies.

necessary to defeat her and restore the dragon lands.

Translated into the game space, Legend is much more stop-and-go than its predecessors and more combat-based. Along the way Spyro will learn (and had better master) an array of tactics and combos, flipping his prey into the air, and often each other. The key to destroying larger prey is in storing power from slaying lesser hordes to unleash Spyro's fierce (and nicely slowed down) special attacks. Spyro must also master the use of four magical elements which can be individually upgraded by collecting blue crystals. Those once token elemental attacks have become pyrotechnic forces of nature.

Not to say that Legends is a beat-'em-up. The fighting is nuanced, often quarantined, and layered with mild puzzle elements, but elsewhere there's an abundance of platforming along with all-new flying stages that make the old ones pale in comparison. Graphically the game is as gorgeous as it can be and rich with fine details like little pads of earth that fly up from Spyro's claws, shallow mist, hand-drawn effects on water, sparkling snow, reflective surfaces, and real-time lighting you'll want to write home to mom about. The music is also appropriately regal, in league with the voice acting, which is for the most part way above par, with Gary Oldman as Spyro's mentor Ignitus and of course the ever-tacky Spade sparring with the innocent Wood. With any luck Krome's overhaul will prove lucrative enough to warrant them continuing the brand, flying Spyro into next-gen skies and who knows, perhaps a veritable rebirth. Hey, if it can happen to four mutant turtles he's got as good a shot as any. **play**

Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning

score 8.5

+

-

system(s):	Xbox 360 (reviewed) PC, PS2	Publisher:	Eidos	Available:	September 26
Developer:	Avalanche Studios	Online/Multi:	NA	ESRB Rating:	M

Just Cause

Rodriguez, Rico Rodriguez

Dave Halverson

View to a kill... many kills.

"Just Cause's modus operandi is part GTA and part Far Cry combined with a mega dose of originality."

Just Cause is a game of many missions—with an island chain to liberate and a slimy dictator to overthrow, Rico Rodriguez is up to his ears in dirty deeds, but when it comes to adrenaline-charged action, nobody does it better than the Latino James Bond.

Car (motorcycle, jeep, moped, boat, helicopter, jet) chases, shootouts, demolition, and extreme stunts are his specialty and the playground that Avalanche has given us to put him through his paces is a mucho grande postcard from paradise. Let the revolution begin!

Just Cause's modus operandi is part GTA and part Far Cry combined with a mega dose of originality. The overall structure is familiar—triggering main mission ops to further the story in between a myriad of side quests and extracurricular exploration—but the look and feel is altogether spanking new. The character and especially vehicle design are all distinctively homegrown, adding a wonderful air of exaggeration to the carnage (Rico's a good guy but he does very bad things) along with a level of story integration that seems to be this category's new calling card. The random feeling of the overall open-world mass is dissipated leaving a feeling that wherever you are or whatever you're doing you are still connected to the cause. The government policia are on high alert—slip up at all and they're all over you like a mobile mariachi—and the cartels are both organized and malicious. Turning them on each other gives you the feeling you're guest starring on an old episode of Miami Vice. And then there's the music. If you're a sucker for Flamenco and the melancholy dirge of Spanish westerns, prepare for deep cover. You will feel the pulse of the island coursing through your veins. Most of all however, as if all of that isn't enough, the single most standout feature in Just Cause is the world itself. No game has ever afforded this level of freedom, and it's simply breathtaking to behold. I haven't seen the PS2 version but honestly, I hope I never have to. This game belongs right here. I can smell the sequel. I hope Rico has a sister.

Just Cause score 9.0

[illegible]	Xbox 360, PlayStation 2	[illegible]	Koei	[illegible]	Now
[illegible]	Omega Force	[illegible]	2-player competitive play	[illegible]	T

Samurai Warriors 2

Feudal Fantasy Redux

words Greg Orlando

Fine detail... Now available in hordes.

It would be the apex of foolishness to suggest Samurai Warriors 2 is a radical departure from the original Samurai Warriors, and even suggesting that it's anything more than a Madden-like update seems vaguely like a snake oil pitch. Koei's been coasting with both Dynasty- and Samurai Warriors, and this latest game is simply the latest iteration of been there and so forth.

A finely tuned beat-'em-up, Samurai Warriors 2 once again drops players into feudal Japan for a series of epic brawls. As ever, players get to select their hero and run around fairly large battlefields, battling both enemy peons and officers, and racking up body counts in the hundreds. Warriors 2 does a fine job of presenting a game screen full of enemies ripe for the slaughter, as well as in-game missions to complete, powerups to collect, and an enemy leader to defeat to ensure victory.

It will be all very familiar to anyone who's ever taken to the fields of battle in any one of the Dynasty- or Samurai Warriors titles. The classic criticisms of the series as a whole are still very much applicable here: Samurai Warriors 2 can be beaten almost wholly by jamming on one button. Although players are ostensibly fighting with a series of A.I-controlled allies, they'll be required to win battles without any aid. Further, they'll need to be everywhere at once in order to strike at the enemy commander, complete the various challenges presented to them, and defend their army's commander-in-chief should he fall under attack. It seems absurd that one hero could win or lose a battle entirely by himself, but Samurai Warriors takes this as a matter of course.

> "It remains great fun to tear into an enemy squad..."

Regardless, the formula works well. It remains great fun to tear into an enemy squad, sending five or ten suckers hurtling into their comrades with one well-placed rushing attack. Success on the battlefield is instantly rewarded. Not only does the game keep track of the player's kills, but it also drops powerups boosting a hero's attack or defense, increasing his speed, or replenishing health at fairly regular intervals. Further, RPG-game features ensure that, with experience, a hero will become speedier, more powerful, and able to perform new attacks.

A new store feature has been added, allowing players to take the gold they've earned and purchase new skills, weapons, bodyguards, and mounts. Ten characters have been added to the game's roster, and a brand-new option lets players conquer Japan in an odd little four-player Monopoly-like board game. Called Sugoroku, this turn-based game is punctuated by brief action sequences, and a genuine delight to play. It's not the brand-new trick for an old dog players might be hoping for, but it is a very nice break from Koei's well-worn Samurai showdown. play

[illegible] Warriors 2

score 8.0

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Square Enix	Available	October
Developer	Tri-Ace	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

Valkyrie Profile SILMERIA

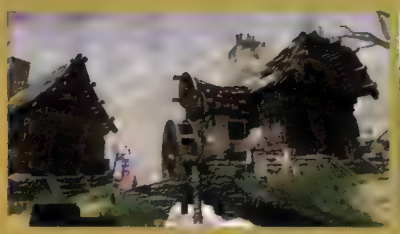
Odin's Way

words **Dave Halverson**

In this prequel to the original Valkyrie Profile on PlayStation, Norse mythology is again fused with the baroque as Silmeria—a once devoted follower of Odin—defiantly sets out in her earthly vessel. Banished to the mortal world, her spirit emerges within the soft-spoken Princess of Dipan, Alicia, causing her father the king (thinking her mad) to banish her to a faraway castle and pronounce her dead to the people. Our story begins as a pair of heavenly bodies urge Alicia to escape the castle as grave danger is afoot. It is forbidden for two Valkyries to occupy the same realm and Hrist has come to order Silmeria back to Valhalla. When she refuses, Odin declares war on Dipan, and so the princess thought dead along with her inner deity begin the trek to warn the king of the impending war...

If originality is what you seek in a 3D RPG then VP Silmeria is your ultimate destination. Everything about this extraordinarily beautiful RPG, while similar to its predecessor, is inimitable in the 3D world.

Where shoddy fields once laid you will find rapturous polygonal side-scrolling that rivals anything on next-gen, setting the stage for some of the most fascinating adventuring in any RPG. Enemies appear on the map as apparitions which can be either engaged in battle or bypassed by freezing them with Silmeria's photon shots and passing through their ether. Whether you choose to engage them or not, once crystallized, their forms serve as vessels. You can push them into place to use as platforms to reach higher ground, or shoot them again to swap places, creating an interesting divergence of puzzle action within the tiered dungeons, wrought with secret chambers. It's a fascinating way to design an over-world, especially given that it's perhaps the most stunning ever seen on PS2, tethered to the best map you'll likely ever encounter.



The battle system is equally appealing. Once engaged, your party can either split or fight as a team. The party is encircled within rings and the enemies on individual grids. The idea is to avoid the grids (or move in when they're faded) and snare the opposition within your range. Once targeted, each button represents an attack. Let the fray begin. I should go into the AP gauge and Einherjars (the materialized souls of the fallen who were never transferred to Valhalla and now dwell within Alicia's body), but for lack of space just believe me when I say that this battle system, combined with the nature of the encounters is practically second to none.

Everything about Silmeria, except for the localization, which is good but pales to the likes of FF XII (but what doesn't?) is the stuff that RPG dreams are made of. Between this, FF XII, .hack//G.U. and Okami I've been swept away this month like I haven't been since the '90s with my PS2. Out with the old and in with the new? I don't think so. **play**

Valkyrie Profile Silmeria — score 9.0

Eureka Seven Vol. 1: The New Wave

score 6.5

Half a game is better than none

[redacted]	PlayStation 2
[redacted]	Namco Bandai
[redacted]	Namco Bandai
[redacted]	1-2 player
[redacted]	October
[redacted]	T

It's hard to define the essence of a well-made anime series, but game designers are forced to do just that when they cram long-running, multi-dimensional series into narrow video game genres. For Eureka Seven, Namco-Bandai have focused on the series' mech-like LFOs, crafting an excellent mech-versus-mech(s) battle system that is fast, smooth, and unfailingly fun. But by reducing Eureka Seven to a simple, arcadey version of *MechWarrior*, they've sacrificed much of the series' charm.

The New Wave and its sequel, *The New Vision*, act as an eleven-episode prequel to the Eureka Seven TV series. This one stars new character Sumner Sturgeon, following his life from the first LFO training mission to the day he helps discover the [SPOILER DELETED]. You won't get to play as Renton or Eureka (and super-bland Sumner is a poor substitute), but fans of the series will enjoy seeing a few familiar faces in their formative years. Story scenes are frequent but crudely executed, playing out entirely in so-so real-time graphics and with no opportunities for player interaction.

Throughout the 10-hour quest, you'll have a few opportunities to play a Tony Hawk-esque lifting game (read that as "sky-surfing" if you're not a Eureka Seven fan), which provides a welcome break from the LFO battles. But it's not enough to shake the feeling that you're playing a series of mini-games instead of a fully-realized adventure. Eureka Seven is a tasty side dish, but it doesn't satisfy as a meal. **Casey Loe**

The special effects hit strong and often.

IGPX

score 6.5

Smash TV

[redacted]	PlayStation 2
[redacted]	STING
[redacted]	Namco Bandai Games
[redacted]	1-2 player
[redacted]	September
[redacted]	E

At the end of the Saturday morning, I think IGPX will please its younger fans, although it makes some mistakes along the way that may keep discerning gamers at bay. While fictitious IGPX racing does have a desolate feel it's nowhere near as vacant as depicted in the game. Before each race the camera s-l-o-w-l-y pans in and then around the nimble mechs, during which they may as well be paintings…No heat signatures, no lighting, and no animation of any kind. It may be the stillest moment ever in a video game (in the preview version I thought it was a glitch). This lack of continuity inoculates the entire game. Elsewhere, nicely orchestrated anime clips and quips intertwine to further each season, but the feeling of fighting on an automaton rail system pervades. It's debatable whether or not the tactical elements (switching between machines throughout each 3 on 3 race fending of attackers until the final charge) can support the entire game, although they certainly fit the bill and intensify in synch with each passing rung of the IG ladder. I was hoping for a more F-Zero meets Wipeout synthesis, but I'm mildly amused. I think it's high time Bandai Namco tapped Treasure for some 2D anime bliss; enough squandering already. **Dave Halverson**

Scarface: The World is Yours

...and it's not really worth having

score 5.0

PlayStation 2, Xbox	NA
Radical	October
Sierra	M

Give Scarface: The World is Yours credit: Any game pretentious enough to have two credit sequences—one for its actors and one for its musical talent—has cojones to spare.

Scarface is welcome to this world. It's graphically bland and its gameplay does little, if anything, to advance the open-world crime adventure as a genre. When protagonist Tony Montana wants to cut a drug deal, sweet talk the cops, intimidate his foes, or get a good rate on money laundering, the game can think of no better way to handle this than to present a player with a rapidly filling circular meter. If a player stops the meter just before it's completely filled, well, he wins. The system is no more pertinent or relevant than if a video coin was flipped to determine the success of Montana's actions, and it's wholly out of place in a game where force determines everything.

When it was conceived, the game was perhaps ahead of its time. Oft-delayed, Scarface now looks and feels old; it's been eclipsed by prettier, smarter, and more interesting crime adventures such as The Godfather and Saints Row for the Xbox 360. Say hello to our little friend, great disappointment. **Greg Orlando**

Test Drive Unlimited

Hawaiian Punch-it!

score 9.0

PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360 (reviewed), PC	2-8p
Eden Games	August
Atari	T

Who better to pave the way for Car-PGs than Eden Studios? When it comes to high-performance racing, they do chicken right. Once upon a time they applied their skills to an exceptional adventure/platformer called Kya: Dark Legacy, but nobody came out to play, so back to the garage they went to pull the fork out of the dusty old Test Drive license and birth a venerable island paradise of open-road, open-world high-speed livin'. You get a house (and more importantly garage) to fill, a closet to squirrel away purchases and then, well, the road beckons, and there is much to do. Via races, challenges, missions and tournaments you decide how you earn your winnings and how you spend them. Beyond the myriad dealerships dotting the island, when you're not working towards a new car or bike, the stores are open and customization and high performance upgrades are practically never-ending, so make it your own. The game's A.I.-controlled humans are a discerning bunch—just like in real life—and status has its privileges. The depth here, coupled with the stunning visuals and array of vehicles, make TDU an absolute enthusiasts dream, while the open-world and go-at-your-own-pace RPG aspects make it the ultimate testing ground. What better way for fresh gamers to get their bearings than 1000 miles of tropical paradise?

With so many vehicles to choose from, handling characteristics are all over the map and the global positioning system takes it sweet time barking out directions, but even paradise has a few bumps in the road. These are more likes flies on the windshield. Massively Open Online Racing has arrived. **Dave Halverson**

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System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Atlus	Available	October 10
Developer	Grasshopper Manufacture	Online/Multi	Wi-Fi	ESRB Rating	E

Contact

words Heather Campbell

Now that's original

It's a good time to be a gamer. What I mean to say is, the DS is encouraging some of the most inspired development in console history. And as exciting as the first few waves of DS games were, this coming generation of games is just staggering. Artists and programmers are stretching their minds -- examining the conventions of gameplay construction, and cultivating some fantastic, elegant and inventive things for those tiny two-screens.

Contact, the newest game from Grasshopper Manufacture (Killer7), is one of those games. Quite simply, it took my breath away. For a game I had never played before, it felt intimate and familiar. Contact was nostalgic from the title screen.

As far as I can tell, the game's power comes down to a few simple artistic choices, all based in the metaphor of contact; contact as dialogue, contact as the collision of two dissimilar ideas, contact as communication with the player. The theme is immediate and critical; from the moment you begin the game, you're enveloped by it. For example, the top screen features NES-inspired pixel art. On the bottom is a lush style not unlike late SNES games. The two art styles are constantly commenting on one another, building an energetic friction in the game. As soon as you see it, you can't help but think, "Why hasn't anyone had this idea before?"

Furthermore, Contact prides itself on breaking the fourth wall. An NPC Professor communicates with the player, asking personal questions and delivering gameplay suggestions while being aware his presence on the DS itself. The Professor is game-conscious even while the hero, Terry, remains oblivious.

Now, you don't have to have a bunch of pretentious ideas floating around in your head to enjoy the game. Contact isn't a lecture about game theory; it's a charming RPG with a few fantastic in-game features. Unlike more traditional RPG games, leveling up is instantaneous – new abilities are acquired during battles. Also, each skill is leveled up individually (an idea grafted from MMO's). To become better with a stick, you have to swing it a lot. And if you want to build up a better defense, let yourself get hit.

Other nice gameplay features include the costume system, in which Terry changes outfits to get new skills (a feature vaguely reminiscent of Killer7's personalities, or the dress spheres of Final Fantasy X-2) and the decal system. Early in the game, the Professor equips Terry with a set of stickers which can be peeled out of Terry's inventory and applied to the lower screen, changing status details or monster abilities.

Despite pulling from some established conventions, Contact feels and looks really original, like a remix of a song that eclipses the source. It feels postmodern and classic all in the same heartbeat.

Contact

score 9.5

Originality

"Contact isn't a lecture about game theory; it's a charming RPG with a few fantastic in-game features."

When graphics collide... beautiful

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	Winter 2006/2007

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

Solid as a rock...

Greg Orlando

"It's like suicide," Kojima Productions' Ryan Payton jokingly says about the effort required to translate Metal Gear Solid to the Sony PSP. With the creation of the game's plot, translation of gameplay to a handheld console, implementation of wireless multiplayer action and WiFi-based special features, and the creation of static cut-scenes, the developers have their hands full with Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops.

Ops is the first action-based Metal Gear Solid Game to make it to the PSP. It takes place after the events of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater, with protagonist Big Boss seeking to bust out of prison and foil a South American revolution. The game also promises to reveal Boss' greatest tragedy, something that starts the ball rolling for titles set later in the series' history.

This time around, Boss can enlist allies to his cause. Enemies can be subdued, interrogated, and turned; in this way, players can build a four-man squad suited to their particular style of play. Captured characters will possess different skills and inclinations; Some will be better at spying, and will be able to see more of the in-game map than their comrades while others will be medically trained, or able to perform as engineers. Allies can be positioned strategically throughout the game's environments and will remain hidden—Konami is not saying how—until players take direct control over them. It will be possible, of course, to leap from character to character at will.

Konami will also be setting up WiFi hotspots around the globe, allowing players to access such and acquire new characters. Some of these, Payton notes, will be duds or soldiers with limited abilities. Others, he suggest, will be powerful indeed. These characters will be pulled from existing Metal Gear titles and can be used in the game's multiplayer competitions.

"Ops is the first action-based Metal Gear Solid Game to make it to the PSP."

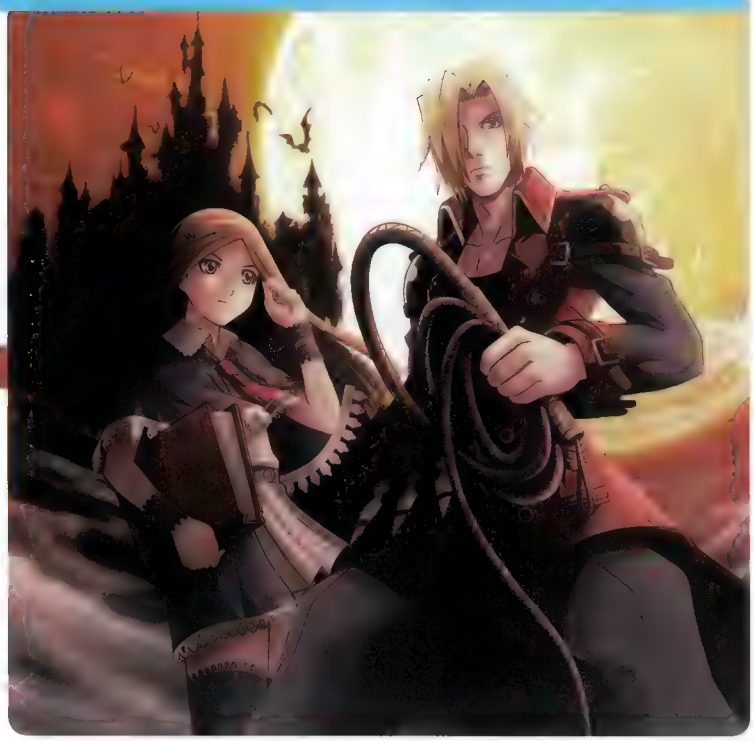
Ad hoc and infrastructure play will be included for six or, possibly, eight players. Players can trade characters if they so choose, and can even opt to raise the white flag and surrender during battles in order to keep their handpicked team intact. Konami is promising a host of modes, options, and environments for Ops' multiplayer action, but a recent build only included a four-player deathmatch set in what appeared to be a trench-laden training camp. Although standard fare, the mode was revelatory because it demonstrated exactly how the game's action plays out: Exploration takes place in the third-person perspective, but switches to first-person when the PSP's right trigger button is pressed and a weapon called up.

Comic artist Ashley Wood has been tapped to draw the game's cut-scenes, and Payton suggests a lot of characters from the Metal Gear Series will make appearances in Ops. Certainly, he notes, actors such as David Hayter and James Mathis (Boss and Sigint, respectively) will be lending their voices to the game. **play**

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	November

Castlevania
Portrait of Ruin

A very pretty picture of despair



words **Greg Orlando**

Brauner the vampire wants you to come to his place to see his paintings. No, really.

Castlevania celebrates its 20th anniversary with the release of the Nintendo DS' Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin. The 2D adventure is set during the dark days of World War II, and features two neophyte heroes battling the evil, balding, and pallid vampire Brauner while simultaneously trying to prevent his demon-seed offspring, Stella and Loretta, from reviving Dracula.

Artwork in Brauner's lair serves as both the inspiration for the game's title, as well as a series of portals allowing players entrance into other worlds—just like the paintings in the classic platformer Super Mario 64. Each painting, of course, has its own theme corresponding to the world it allows access to.

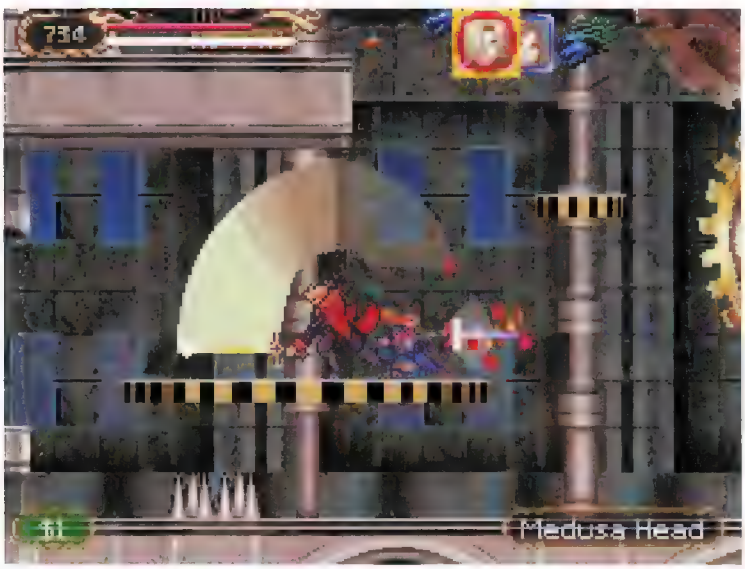
Gone are Aria of Sorrow and Dawn of Sorrow's soul system and Dawn's seal system. These features, which allowed players to steal enemy souls and powers and draw symbols on the DS' touch pad, respectively, were considered too intrusive by the developers. The intent with Portrait of Ruin is to focus directly on gameplay, and these two systems served to break up the action and also draw players out of the overall experience.

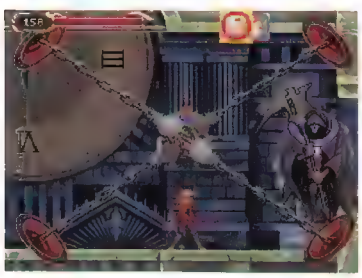
Heroes Jonathan Morris and Charlotte Orlean run through the game levels together, and a simple button press lets players choose which character they're controlling. For the most part, the second character stays out of the way, but players can use the Nintendo DS' stylus and its touch pad to position the A.I.-controlled hero in order to use a special attack or simply put him/her a good distance from harm's way.

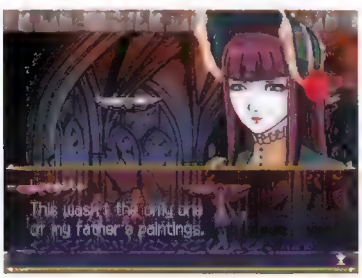
Morris is the more physical of the two heroes and utilizes powerful melee- and ranged attacks with axes, boomerangs, grenades, swords, and whips. His partner Orlean is adept at magic and can toss spells at her foes. Together, the two can combine their powers for screen-clearing combination attacks, and will be to acquire new weapons and spells over the course of the game.

Players can expect lots of jumping puzzles, additional puzzles concerned chiefly with the pushing of large objects, combat aplenty, and in-game missions given to players by a mysterious spirit called Wind. Little is known about Wind, but a few introductory missions had him sending the heroes out to fetch items.

Neat bits sampled in a playable previewed shown at a recent Konami-held press day included an outdoor environment set in the Saharan desert. Players got to run around a series of dunes battles mummies with the Egyptian pyramids fixed in the background. It certainly was a bit of a departure for the Castlevania series, but then the best pieces of art rarely stick to the tried-and-true. **play**







"The intent with Portrait of Ruin is to focus directly on gameplay."

Double trouble for a vintage Castlevania creature

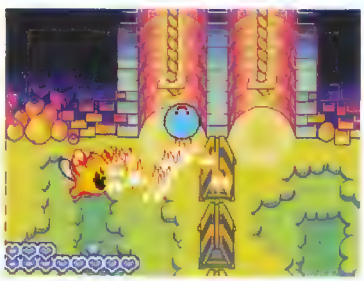
Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime

score 8.5

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	1
Developer	Square Enix	**Available**	September
Publisher	Square Enix	**ESRB Rating**	Teen

Spin-offs aren't as common in the video game world as they are in Hollywood, but with Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime, maybe more companies should take a cue from Square Enix. Based around those beloved blobs from the world of Dragon Quest, players take the role of Rocket, a cheerful blue slime who must scour Slimenia to save the other members of his village after they're slimenapped without warning. Most of the game is an overhead adventure romp, as Rocket rescues his captive friends, collecting items and overcoming obstacles in the process. The beautiful 2D environments provide a great visual experience, and feature enough variety to keep the game always feeling fresh.

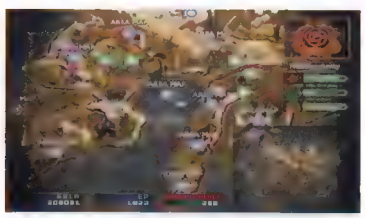
The evil Plob gang doesn't take too kindly to Rocket's fight for slime freedom, so throughout the game they challenge him to duels using giant tanks. As the top screen shows a zoomed out view of the tank-on-tank action, you directly control Rocket on the bottom screen, scrambling to load your tank's cannons with ammo while keeping pesky intruders out. I applaud the effort that was made in crafting these battles, but as soon as you master the art of enemy tank sabotage, it's nearly impossible to lose a duel. **Eric L. Patterson**



Spectral Souls

score 6.0

System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	T
Developer	Idea Factory	**Available**	September
Publisher	NIS America	**ESRB Rating**	Teen



You know, there's just something about finding a comfortable spot and relaxing with a good handheld strategy game. I'd like to recommend Spectral Souls for such an occasion, but unless you're a hardcore SRPG junkie, it might be more frustration than relaxation. The core gameplay presented here isn't overly fancy or innovative compared to other SRPGs I've played, but it's solid enough and enjoyable. Where things go wrong is that that core is then wrapped in inexcusable bouts of slowdown, mixed with some of the most extensive loading I've ever seen in a game. Even after being improved over the Japanese version, things are still a mess: when the PSP has to stop to load every individual text bubble in a cut-scene conversation, that's a bad sign.

Idea Factory crafted Spectral Souls to be part of their ongoing "Neverland" saga, and while this means a substantial level of depth in the history of the characters, countries, and raging war, it also means it's very easy at times to feel totally lost as to what exactly is going on. The ability to switch between the different sides of the war during the game, to see the struggle from different perspectives, is one of the coolest features presented, but also one of the most unsettling. Playing as one army, and then in the next battle killing the troops I was moments ago fighting to protect... I felt like such a dirty backstabber. **Eric L. Patterson**

Killzone: Liberation

score 6.5

System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	Multi-Player/Co-op
Developer	Guerilla Games/SCE	**Available**	Oct.
Publisher	SCEA	**ESRB Rating**	RP

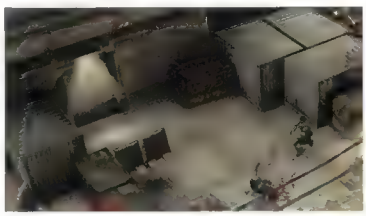
Ever been sitting at home on a Saturday, watching a mediocre 80's action movie on cable, unable to get up off the couch? You sit through two hours of action clichés, and then the credits roll – always faster than normal, so that the advertisers can squeeze two more commercials into the break. As the names flash across the screen, and you stare at all the people who poured time into the movie, you think, "Why didn't they try to make something better?"

So many people spent so much time working on Killzone: Liberation. I feel guilty saying: It's Just Average. It's a PSP action game with a tactical edge. It has good graphics, some sweet enemy design (the storm-trooper Helghast return from the PS2 game), a huge variety of weapons, and well produced, jingoistic voiceovers.

You might go buy it, and play it to completion, but when you're done with it you'll put the game on the shelf and never think about it again. It's a combat game with a dynamic, isometric camera. After hours of mission-based battles ("Hey, set this charge at the glowing mark to blow up that wall!""We can't let those guys over there do that thing!" "Go to point A and then point B! Hurry!"), and a familiar, sci-fi military plot, you'll be left feeling empty and unmoved.

I've been moved by action games before. It's not the genre. It's the design. Any game can be an emotional experience if it has a little soul. And to put it bluntly, Killzone: Liberation is just soulless.

But then again, sometimes you find yourself watching old action movies on cable, unable to get up off your ass. It can be a good way to waste an afternoon. **Heather Campbell**

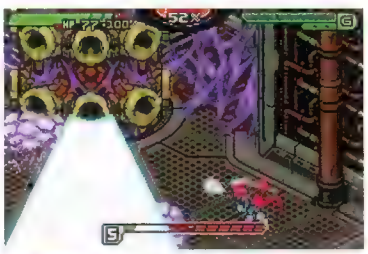


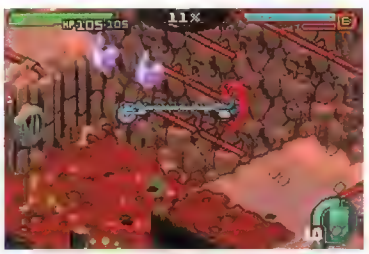
Welcome to the killzone.

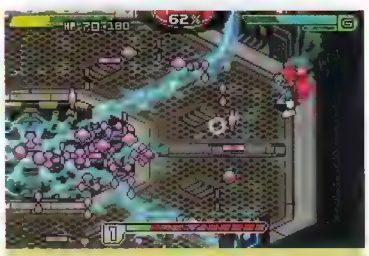
Scurge: Hive

System(s)	Nintendo DS/GBA	**Publisher**	Southpeak Interactive
Developer	Orbital Media	**Available**	September

Orbital is somewhat of an enigma. They make gorgeous, ultra-polished Nintendo games yet they're virtually unknown. Hopefully that is about to change. Their latest, coming off of one of the best top-down racers on any system (Racer on GBA) we find a new heroine, Jenosa, in a familiar setting. Scurge: Hive is more than a little reminiscent of Metroid only made spanking new via ¾ view gameplay, a saucy anime guise, and a level of old-school Nintendo polish that you just don't find in 3rd-party software. It's amazing that Orbital isn't a 1st-party studio. Though my time with the game was brief (I only got in a couple of hours), the gameplay, while old-school difficult, is pretty great, if not a little easier on the DS due to the design and interface (aside from the stylus interface the games are identical). It's a bit difficult to come to grips with aiming (oh how I wish they'd have made the horizontal movement diagonal on the d-pad) especially amidst swarming enemies (run, turn, shoot, repeat is the name of the game early on) but once you dial it in and get the tether (one of the game's many devices) things begin to really come alive. The music and sound effects are top notch, as is the presentation, of which there is almost too much. The game stops to chatter a bit much for my tastes but, well, so did Metroid. **Dave Halverson**







Hand drawn for your viewing pleasure.

Star Fox Command

score 7.5

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	4-player Wi-Fi battle
Developer	Q Games	**Available**	August
Publisher	Nintendo	**ESRB Rating**	E10+

It was only a matter of time before Star Fox found its way onto the DS. Instead of being a remixed version of a classic Star Fox (the N64 version springs to mind), Star Fox Command is an original effort offering up some interesting new ideas as well as classic McCloud shooting action.

As developed by Q Games (who also made the Digidrive bit Generations game for GBA), Star Fox Command abandons the fixed, "on-rails" type play that has typified all or portions of the previous games. The levels here are basically all free-flying, with a basic goal in each of simply destroying a set number of targets. To be honest, I missed the on-rails type gameplay a little as I always enjoyed the slightly juiced up graphics and thrilling scenarios that could be orchestrated. But Star Fox Command does have something unique to offer in exchange. As its title might suggest, there's a tactical element to the game. Don't worry, it's nothing scary. It's just a simple sort of turn-based affair between levels as you move your ships around the touch screen engaging enemies and launching missiles. It adds an extra bit of fun, offering rewards for doing well in the actual shooting stages.

As for the shooting action itself, it's good. One could argue that it's a little repetetive. However, the game easily avoids tedium by simply being fun. The stylus-based control quickly becomes second nature and spinning your Arwing up into the mothership to blow it up is as fun the 50th time as it was the first. Another appealing aspect includes the ability to play as various characters throughout the game's branching story and fly their unique ships. And like a lot of DS titles, simple and fast 4 player Wi-Fi play only adds to the fun.

I quite liked Star Fox Command. Though I really wouldn't have minded if the game was more like the N64 version (my fave), I understand and enjoy the choices that Q Games made here. It's a good effort. **Michael Hobbs**

The mothership must always go down...

Star Trek: Tactical Assault

System(s)	PSP, DS	**Publisher**	Bethesda
Developer	Quicksilver	**Available**	October

The final frontier awaits, complete with two extended scenarios for the United Federation of Planets or the Klingon Empire.

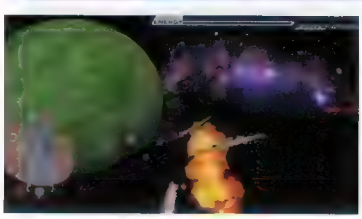
Star Trek: Tactical Assault boldly goes where no Trek has gone before: The Nintendo DS and Sony PSP. Players take command of a starship here, and are tasked with either preserving the peace or destroying it. Missions have players, as a neophyte captain during the time of Kirk and company, racing across the galaxy to various hotspots in order to accomplish goals.

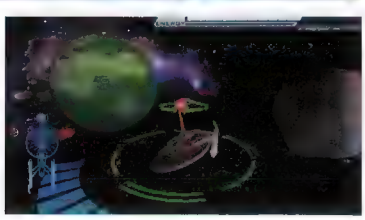
Last Name,
T'Kal
Vulcan
Ensign
Engineering
T'Kal was in the top of her class at the academy, and joined Starfleet at the request of her late father. She finds humans to be an exceptionally interesting race, and is fascinated by their ancient cultures and classical artwork.

Each of the game's starships has two separate weapon systems and its own set of defensive shields. Klingon and Romulan vessels can employ a cloaking device to make them invisible to enemies, and Federation starships can recharge their shields in combat. The game, of course, emphasizes starship-based combat, but captains will be able to hail enemy ships and talk their way out of a fight. Completing missions allows captains to upgrade their crew. This, in turn, improves a ship's performance in terms of its engines, shields, and weapons.

When the lure of story-based play loses its luster, the game also offers multiplayer action, and a skirmish mode where players can try piloting Romulan, Gorn, and Orion ships in addition to Klingon and Federation cruisers. **Greg Orlando**

So much fun for the Star Trek fan!





Developer	SimBin
Publisher	10Tacle / Viva Media
Online multiplayer	32p online racing
Available	September

words **Mike Griffin**

SimBin's co-founder Henrik Roos is an ex-pro race driver and GT team owner, and like a smaller European version of Polyphony Digital, his development team is filled with serious racing nuts. Henrik's passion for the sport and his team's incredible attention to detail in the first GTR unfortunately had a negative, if flattering, side-effect: the game was simply *too* hardcore for some. GTR 2 ups the ante on realism and opens the door to new racers with the addition of a comprehensive driving school mode.

Our time with a near-complete preview version of GTR 2 certainly confirms SimBin's mastery of the sport. There's *a lot* going on in this racing code. Weather conditions, for example, boast impressive decorative and simulation algorithms. Let's say you're driving GTR 2's winding Barcelona track and a light afternoon shower begins to fall. Dynamic clouds roll in, tire temperatures change, and water splashes off the car and windshield. As the rain dies down, the track will begin to dry in a way that mimics its real-world counterpart, while realistic fading tire lines will appear as vehicles zoom through wet-to-dry areas.

Speaking of wet tracks, let's talk crash damage. Though modeled at a reasonable simulation level (this isn't a FlatOut game), GTR 2 has attractive collision effects. Vehicle parts deform and break off during high velocity impacts, and the flying metal can damage other vehicles. Sparks, smoke, and breaking glass compliment the smash-ups. Headlights will bust independently and the game features 100% dynamic lighting, so it's best to stay alert during nighttime races like the Proximus 24 (think LeMans). Many subtle touches like this separate GTR 2 from its peers.

Inner beauty
GTR 2's car interiors feature shiny reflections, shadows, bump-mapped dashes and drivers that animate—steering, gearing, leaning against G-forces and checking the rear-view mirror as opponents close-in.

The driving school mode will progressively introduce you to the powerhouse modified sports cars that tear up the GT circuit. Twenty five elite models—beauties like the lovely Ferrari 360 Modena, Viper Coupe, Porsche GT3 and Maserati MC12—are available in various official team configurations. The cars are lavishly modeled. Once you've witnessed a good race in the "Superfidelity" replay mode, you'll wonder why you haven't been watching GT racing on TV. While we can't confirm the authenticity of each vehicle's body roll, curb ratios and other such details, the feel of this racing game engine is unmatched on the PC platform. So we trust that SimBin did its homework.

The details we've mentioned are really just the tip of the iceberg. The cars are very real to the eye and ear, the tracks are authentic and the physics model is insanely accurate. GTR 2 also features 32-player online racing with lobbies, private chat and in-game track voting. Like the original, GTR 2 is still absolutely hardcore racing, yet this time it's an accessible and rewarding kind of precision.

"...the tracks are authentic and the physics model is insanely accurate."

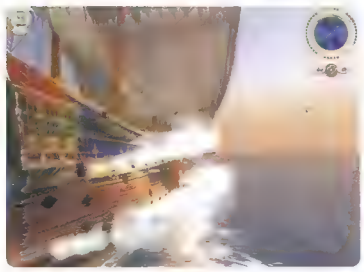
Age of Pirates
Caribbean Tales

Avast ye land lubbers!

Review

words **Mike Griffin**

Developer	Akella	Publisher	Atari
Multiplayer	16p Deathmatch, Team DM, CTF	Available	September



While the score to your right is fairly unimpressive at first glance, Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales is not without merit or depth, and thus should not be written off by RPG or adventure fans. You'll have to wade through some cumbersome action to pillage the high seas, but there's a great deal of gameplay to be had here.

First up, let's address the albatross that rears its ugly head the first time you enter sword combat: the third-person (on foot) action in Age of Pirates stinks. As you shuffle-step with delayed moves, sluggish sword strikes and gimpy blocking, it rarely feels good and the animation is abysmal. This element of the game hampers the grade, as many of the key final battles (after boarding other ships and invading forts) are played out in this perspective.

Thankfully, content surrounding the aforementioned stain is extensive and varied. Sailing the 17th century Caribbean waters involves trading goods between ships, running missions for island governors and plenty of great sea battles. Eventually, as your infamy and riches grow, you'll amass a large fleet led by hired captains and crew and take over every colony in the region—one by one. The rolling ocean engine looks nice (though island backdrops are decidedly bland) and the battle dance of the ships—spinning and adjusting as cannons reload—is quite engaging. AoP's powerful orchestral choir tunes are the perfect accompaniment to sea combat.

Age of Pirates is plagued by slipshod sword fighting and a cluttered interface, but its breadth and freedom—no plot constraints here—are absolutely commendable.

Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales

score 6.5

+

-

"...running missions for island governors and plenty of great sea battles."

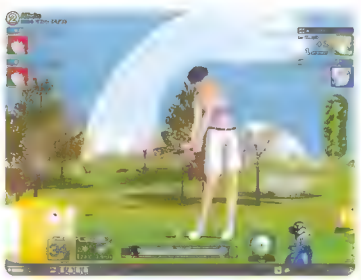
Shot-Online

Golf is better with good company

Review

words **Mike Griffin**

Developer	OnNet	Publisher	Synet Entertainment
Multiplayer	4-player online	Available	September



Synet has picked up Shot-Online for retail release in North America this fall, offering the multiplayer golf game and a solid package of redeemable in-game goodies for under $30 bucks. The game can also be downloaded and played completely free-of-charge. So why pay for it? If you really enjoy the game, Synet's retail package may be very attractive.

Whether you cop the free download or pick-up the game at brick and mortar, Shot-Online is worth playing. Players can mingle with 3D avatars in the town square and enter shops to purchase clothes and golf gear, quickly providing a means to improve and distinguish your character. Shopping naturally requires money, and the pot can't be won unless you hit the course. Synet makes it a great deal easier to begin your career, as the retail version's cyber cash and bonuses provide immediate access to golfing bling.

Shot-Online plays a good game of online golf. Don't expect Tiger Woods-grade simulation, but do expect good netcode and physics, with smooth and tight motion. No herky-jerky slices to be had. The visuals are serviceable (low-to-mid spec PC-friendly) and the game's UI and shot control are difficult to fault. Perhaps most pleasing is the company on the green. The Shot-Online community is very friendly. Players seem to have a genuinely enthusiastic reaction to well-made shots, congratulating each other using the in-game chat system.

Shot-Online is a pleasant snack between much heartier gaming feasts. Persistent levels and stats for one's golfer adds depth, yet a newbie that plays better can still (thankfully) beat the sox off a poorly-played high level character. Whether you require the generous perks of the retail version or not is probably dependent on how much you intend to play.

Every shot animation—like this tough bunker escape—has been motion-captured from Korean PGA tour pros.

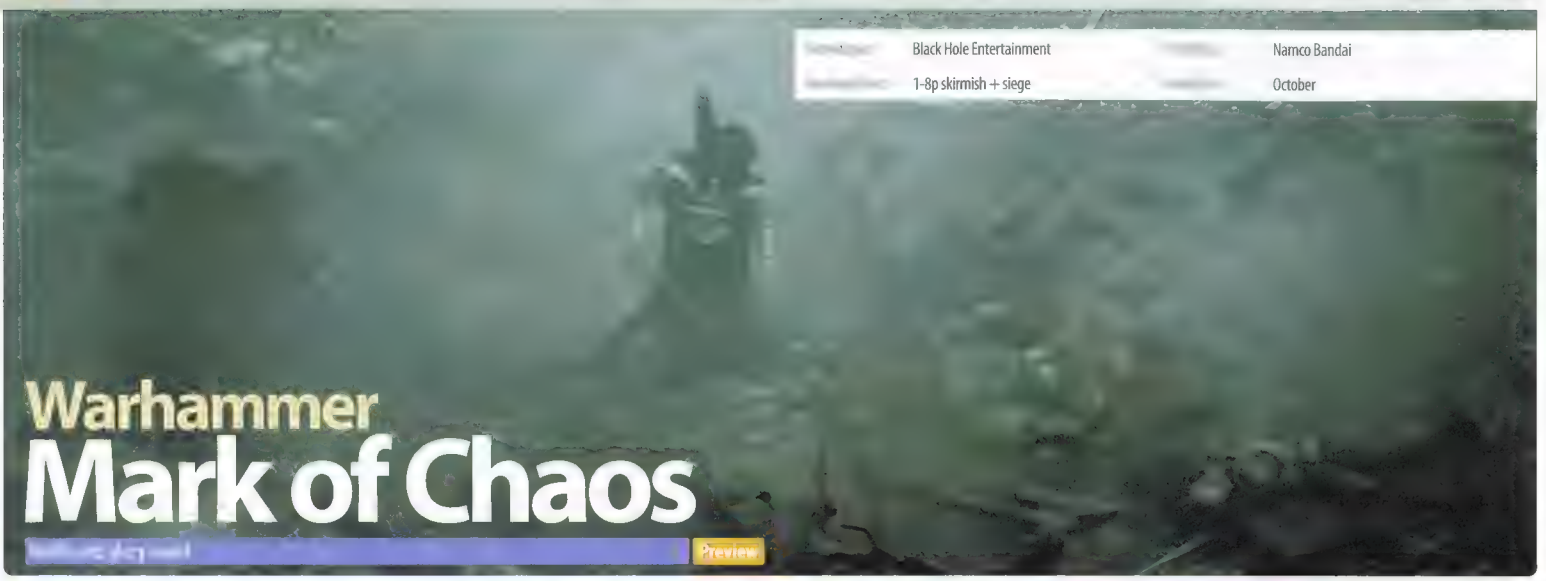
Shot-Online

score 7.0

+

-

"Don't expect Tiger Woods-grade simulation, but do expect good netcode and physics..."



Black Hole Entertainment	Namco Bandai
1-8p skirmish + siege	October

Warhammer Mark of Chaos

Preview

words **Mike Griffin**

We've been enjoying an updated preview of Warhammer: Mark of Chaos featuring a half-dozen or so highly-replayable missions. Late development signs indicate that this fast-paced RTS has the gumption to stand out in the genre while brandishing a strong adherence to Warhammer's wicked designs. The 25-year old license has some of the most vicious battle scenarios in contemporary high fantasy, and developer Black Hole is capturing its essence with an admirable, blood-soaked zest.

The main Empire, Chaos, Skaven and High Elf campaigns (written by Games Workshop's Gav Thorpe) are conducted across a great 3D map drawn in classic parchment style. You'll march popular Warhammer avatars through key battles on this campaign atlas, stopping in friendly towns along the way to re-stock brigades. Warhammer: MoC piles on generous details and options when it comes to the vast battalions you command. Heroes can be leveled-up and feature upgradeable combat, command and dueling (for hero vs. hero duels) skills. Troops and heroes alike can be outfitted with better equipment using RPG-style inventory slots, and there's even a separate army building mode with extensive parameters for tweaking troops, war banners and more. This translates into a very compelling degree of army customizability—especially cool for mods and multiplayer.

Units look and sound great on this battlefield: Chaos marauders pound morning stars through feeble breastplates, Empire swordsmen bellow protective enchantments, Skaven foot soldiers gnaw through skulls and High Elf reavers cascade torrents of arrows. Meanwhile, magic users from every faction scar the battlefield with flames and unholy darkness. Mercs can be hired on to serve in your army, adding dwarves, orcs, goblins, trolls, undead, vampires and giants to the controllable mix. Considering battles can have thousands of units prosecuting hostilities against each other, the unit models are surprisingly complex and really capture the unique Warhammer armor designs. Units are also very well animated and suitably adorned with slick shading effects. The detailed campaign maps often feature dilapidated battlegrounds painstakingly textured to appear as though they've hosted countless bloody encounters. Some missions have you laying siege to forts and castles, and the way the stone walls and barricades gradually break down—from cracked exterior layers to full destruction—looks fantastic. A rousing, rumbling symphonic score charges the war with urgency. Black Hole has certainly improved its craft since Armies of Exigo, its last title.

The game's 1-8p multiplayer modes will include skirmishes and various attacker/defender scenarios involving siege weaponry. Black Hole and Namco Bandai have Starcraft champions and a pool of thousands of testers working to get it just right. At any rate, we're definitely on board for the Warhammer: Mark of Chaos campaign. The gush of crimson as goblins explode inside a cavalry wedge is a sight for sore eyes.

"...battlegrounds painstakingly textured to appear as though they've hosted countless bloody encounters."

Hulking Chaos foot soldiers can absorb plenty of melee damage before finally expiring.

ask alienware

no. 006 // october 2006

Q. I'd like to get into competitive gaming. Alienware obviously gets to play with the best stuff; I'd like to know what kind of gear your staff's hardcore gamers use at home or at LAN parties in terms of headset, mouse and keyboard. Also: do they feel this kind of "elite" gear always makes a big difference when playing specific titles or genres?
Jonathan, Kansas City MO.

Alienware: Just like with any skill, the tools of the trade play a large part in your success. PC gaming is no different. The best tools depend on what type of game you are playing.

- FPS/RTS/MMORPG - Nothing beats a great set of keyboard, mouse and headphones w/ microphone. (Alienware employees are using Razer and Logitech mice, Saitek and Logitech keyboards and headphones with 'noise-canceling' technology.)
- Sports Games (Football, Baseball, Basketball) – For precise player movement Logitech game pads are the game pad of choice for Alienware employees.
- Flight Sims – The flight control system from Saitek provides precision and customizability with separate flight stick and throttle, putting you right into the action.

Q. These Mac commercials are inescapable. The hip young dude [Justin Long from *Accepted*] opens with "Hi, I'm a Mac" and the stuffy spectacled geek next to him then offers "...and I'm a PC." Various comparisons follow. I'd like to know how accurate some of these points are. I've always owned a PC that is suitable for both gaming and multimedia. What is there on a Mac that I can't do on a PC, or vice-versa?
John, San Diego CA.

Alienware: No question that Macs are cool and Apple has done a great job dressing up the Mac as an alternative against a traditional PC. But here's a few things to think about before you make the Mac plunge…First of all, Windows-based PCs are still the vast majority of the market (upwards of 90%), which means developers focus the majority of their resources on Windows-based platforms to market their wares. Sure, you can run Apple's Boot Camp on a Mac so that you can run Windows, but you'll need to buy the full version of Windows XP (more than $200) for the license and you're on your own for technical support, since Apple won't answer Windows-related questions on Macs.

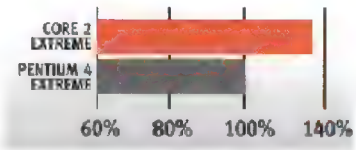
More importantly, while Apples are now being offered with Intel CPUs, gaming applications—especially from a graphics standpoint—are not optimized to run on Macs when using Boot Camp, so your experience will be less than thrilling. Finally, the sheer graphics performance of a PC cannot be matched by a Mac. Windows-based PCs tend to offer better values than comparable Mac systems because there's simply more competition—your Windows-based dollars will probably go a lot farther for richer configurations (more hard drive, memory, etc.).

Q. Looks like Intel has seized the crown from AMD this time in the high-end CPU race. The newest Intel Core 2 Extreme processor is owning all the top benchmarks, whether multi-tasking or running F.E.A.R. As an AMD fan, I'm quite impressed...and a bit worried. How was Intel able to nail it this time, and what kind of response should we expect from AMD?
Shane, Bellevue WA.

Alienware: The benchmarks that are being posted by the newly release Intel Core 2 Duo processors are definitely impressive.

Core 2 Extreme processors are Intel's highest performance dual-core engine and should stand head and shoulders above the competition in terms of pure processing punch and energy-efficiency. Benchmarking on tasks such as 3D gaming and media playback show a significant performance edge when placed head to head against Intel's previous Pentium 4 Extreme Edition processors:

This being said, in the coming months expect the competition to keep pace, with Core 2 Extreme processors most likely setting the bar as the performance leader.



Q. PC gaming is growing to Frankenstein proportions. Four video cards? Physics processors? Gaming ethernet cards? Don't get me wrong; I dig all this stuff. On the other hand, it can really bloat a configuration and generally this stuff needs a lot of TLC. Do you think over the next few years we'll see add-in cards that combine, for example, a GPU and PPU? Perhaps a "gaming card" with video, sound and physics all integrated into one piece? Or could deluxe motherboards eventually offer the power a gamer needs?
Chris, Culver City CA.

The sheer space that is required to have the BEST gaming/entertainment experience is definitely one of the key issues affecting PCs. The technology is becoming much more sophisticated and technologies are fighting for space inside the PC; it's a great problem to have (can't complain about technology). To take care of this space issue, technology companies are working towards combination add-in cards. For example, Nvidia and Havok have already announced plans to create a combination card that will take care of graphics and physics (there is no release timeframe yet).

One more note to keep in mind: as the technologies combine, the dedicated resource to that single activity (graphics or physics) is diminished, meaning the performance of each part will not be the same as if they were separate. So the question is, do you sacrifice performance for space? Either way, it will be an interesting ride.

COME OUT & PLAY

"Are you a player? Alienware is posing that question to consumers and inviting them to "Come Out & Play" as part of a highly interactive new campaign that challenges consumers to join Alienware for a series of events, online gaming competitions and the release of cutting-edge new technology and games. Serving as the nexus of the Come Out & Play crusade is a special new website, located at **www.alienware.com/playcoap**, that gives gamers and PC enthusiasts everything they need to know so they can "bring it on" when they Come Out & Play.

The Come Out & Play website will enable visitors to flaunt their creativity by submitting pictures, videos or anything else that best demonstrates how they play games, music, sports, etc. Gamers will have an additional opportunity to show off their "true player" status by being selected to go head-to-head against Alienware employees in an epic battle for domination and bragging rights. These exclusive online showdowns will be held on Alienware's dedicated game servers, a world where skills are pushed to the limit and reputations can be made or destroyed.

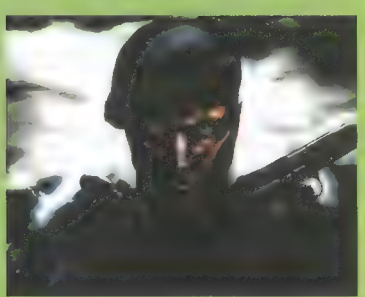
Postscript

1	World Of Warcraft	Vivendi Universal
2	The Sims 2	Electronic Arts
3	Nancy Drew: Danger By Design	Her Interactive
4	Civilization IV: Warlord Expansion Pack	2K Games (Take 2)
5	The Sims 2: Open For Business Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
6	Cars Radiator Springs Adventures	THQ
7	The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
8	Civilization IV	2K Games
9	Paws & Claws Pet Vet	Valusoft (THQ)
10	MS Age Of Empires III	Microsoft

NHN invades America

Armed with free games

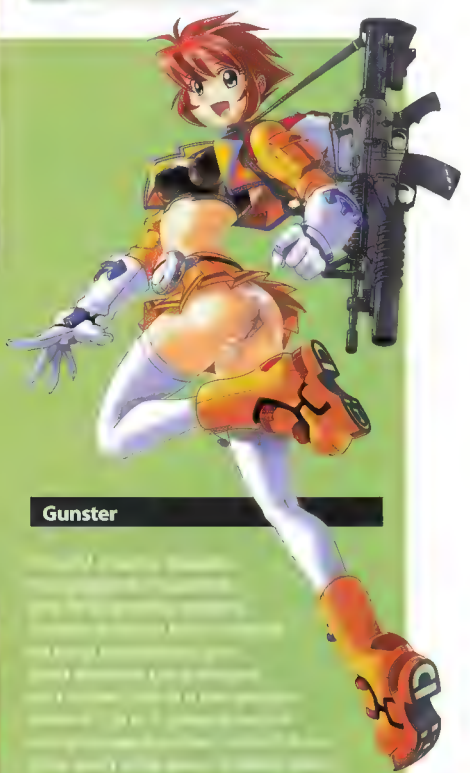
Nameless FPS



KwanHo

Golf King

Gunster



Gunbound

NiGHTS: Into Dreams

[illegible]	Sega Saturn	[illegible]	Sega
[illegible]	Sonic Team	[illegible]	1996

words **Heather Campbell**

The mid-nineties were difficult years for Sega. Their flagship system, Saturn, wasn't catching on in the United States. Playstation was becoming a household name, and Nintendo 64 was a looming technological triumph. Worse yet, Saturn needed a mascot, and Sonic was nowhere to be seen.

Into these exigent circumstances, Sonic Team released NiGHTS: Into Dreams. NiGHTS was a new kind of game, featuring two-dimensional free-form flying. The control was enriched by the inclusion of an analog controller for the previously digital Saturn. The characters, story, music and design were all new.

And immediately, NiGHTS was overlooked, relegated to the significant shadow of Mario64.

Imagine: It's 1996. Michael Jordan is still with the Bulls, Japan is awarded its first hosting gig for the World Cup, Bill Clinton is in the White House, Dr.Who returns to British TV … and Sonic Team is silently sitting in some ramen house, trying not to look at each other over their empty beer mugs. They're not celebrating. Instead, Producer Yuji Naka grumbles, "What went wrong?"

NiGHTS's unique gameplay wasn't deep enough for some, the levels not long enough for others. Yet today, NiGHTS has become a classic, cited frequently as among the best games ever made. We miss NiGHTS.

NiGHTS's story is split into two narratives. One features Claris, the other, Elliot. The pair are typical teenagers full of self doubt, agonizing over their own abilities. One night, after falling asleep, the two enter a dream world and seek to conquer their fears with the help of the genderless, acrobatic NiGHTS. NiGHTS is a Nightmaren relegated to the world of dreams, and it appears as a purple jester, free to fly through dream worlds with the effortlessness of a leaf on a breeze. NiGHTS drifts up, down, left and right, and the background rotates behind him.

"NiGHTS has become a classic, cited frequently as among the best games ever made. We miss NiGHTS."

NiGHTS: Into Dreams is full of a staggering amount of detail, especially for a game on such an old system. It's almost as if you're playing in the lush backdrop of another title—only this background is interactive. If you so choose, you can abandon the mischievous hero, and wander around on the ground as Claris or Elliot, appreciating details that would have otherwise been lost in the speedy blur. Here, under the waterfalls and along the sharp cliffs, another game is embedded in NiGHTS. Deposited throughout the world are tiny eggs. By hatching these eggs, and raising the artificial-life Nightopians within, one can even affect the music of the game by engaging the temperaments of a side quest.

Now, NiGHTS is about dreaming, and the dream metaphor is all-pervasive, allowing for subtle, surreal accents throughout the game world. For example, Zone Two features a car rummaging along the ground, for no reason. Enemies are consistently mysterious, bizarre, and clumsy, like the half-imagined horrors of a nightmare, transfigured in Technicolor.

The sickeningly basic Saturn 3-D also allows the world elements to combine completely, like an impressionist version of a video game world. Secret paths don't assert themselves to the player; hidden passages don't parade as challenges waiting to be unlocked. Instead, the player stumbles into underground caves and secret side-routes with an absentminded, out-of-control abandon. Indeed, sometimes NiGHTS plays like a dream; you are nearly passive, swaying through your prewritten route like an REM protagonist – sometimes in control, oftentimes swept up in the action.

Whenever I go back to play a game from an older system, I try to bring someone along who's never played it. It is testament to NiGHTS's uniqueness that the game is not immediately intuitive. Drop a Halo player down in front of Goldeneye, and they'll get oriented pretty quickly. But no modern game prepares you for NiGHTS. It's not one of those titles that persuades a friend to say, "Hey. This is just like that other thing."

Instead, NiGHTS is a complete vocabulary unto itself. I picked up a copy at Gameland, and invited over a friend. At first, he tried flying into the background. I offered no advice, and he shouted out:

"How do I kill the jellyfish!?"

"Why did I just become purple!"

And finally, "Minus Five! Minus five what!?"

Perhaps it was the unfamiliarity of NiGHTS which made it initially difficult to approach. Sonic's language is born from Mario; rings are like coins, and gravity always drops the hedgehog down to earth. Mario, in turn, retains essentials from earlier titles. Hammers that smash barrels had become mushrooms that allowed you to break bricks. Jumping over enemies had been translated into jumping onto them.

NiGHTS, however, remains matchless. Indeed, if the question is, "What modern game can I play, if I want to play something like NiGHTS?" then the answer can only be:

"If you want to play NiGHTS, you have to play NiGHTS."

Unless Sonic Team gives us a sequel on the Wii.

Then I promise: this time there will be more celebrating. **play**

Welcome to the ultimate dreamscape.

< Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama >

Comiket 2006

Summer Report

words Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

Everyone knows the center of the otaku world lies in Akihabara, Tokyo, among the glitz, glitter and neon, a million fan dreams ensconced within a couple square kilometers. But six days each year, in summer and winter, the otaku tribe migrates, and geek Mecca is transposed onto Tokyo Big Sight, the largest convention center in the city. Welcome to the 70th Comic Market (cool kids contract it Comiket), the world's largest fan convention of any kind, held twice a year and regularly drawing 400,000 attendees.

I'll repeat myself. 400,000. Almost *half a million.* For comparison's sake, that's four times as many as Comic-Con, made all the more surprising by the fact that "professional" merchandise at Comic Market makes up an almost negligible percentage of what's available. Comiket exists for one primary purpose: So that the estimated 35,000 "circles", or *dojin* groups in attendance may ply their wares. The fanaticism with which the Japanese pursue their "underground" comics and games can often eclipse that with which they lust for official releases, and the lines between the two once strictly-segregated worlds are growing ever-more blurry (see box-out for more information). Popular circles often have lines hundreds of people long, usually riddled with *tenbaiya*, or resellers, who pawn exclusive dojinshi for ten times their sticker price in Akihabara. These much-reviled speculators are forced to communicate via shortwave radio, as the mad crush of hundreds of thousands of otaku packed liked sardines in a can makes cellphones useless.

Indeed, it's a wonder nobody has ever died at a Comiket. It's something of a miracle the municipal government even allows the event to take place, given the truly shocking crowd density. There's been a rumor making the rounds that the show has little choice but to change venue or drastically scale down, so if you want to see the *true* heart of Japanese fandom in its current form -- one of the most astonishing sensory experiences you are ever likely to have -- you might want to get while the getting's good. The winter Comiket will be held December 29th through the 31st, and a purchase of the phonebook-thick catalogue from http://www.comiket.co.jp/ is a necessity (overseas shipping is available). Feeling a little disillusioned with your current manga and gaming options? Maybe it's time to take a trip into the underground. I guarantee you'll be absolutely amazed at what you find. An entire universe of otaku wonders you never even knew existed awaits...at Comic Market.

"Comiket exists for one primary purpose: So that the estimated 35,000 "circles", or dojin groups in attendance may ply their wares."

The crowds are, simply put, sheer insanity. This is just one of the several halls lined with dojin merchandise ▸

▲ A textbook otaku squeals with delight, brandishing one of his hard-won prizes

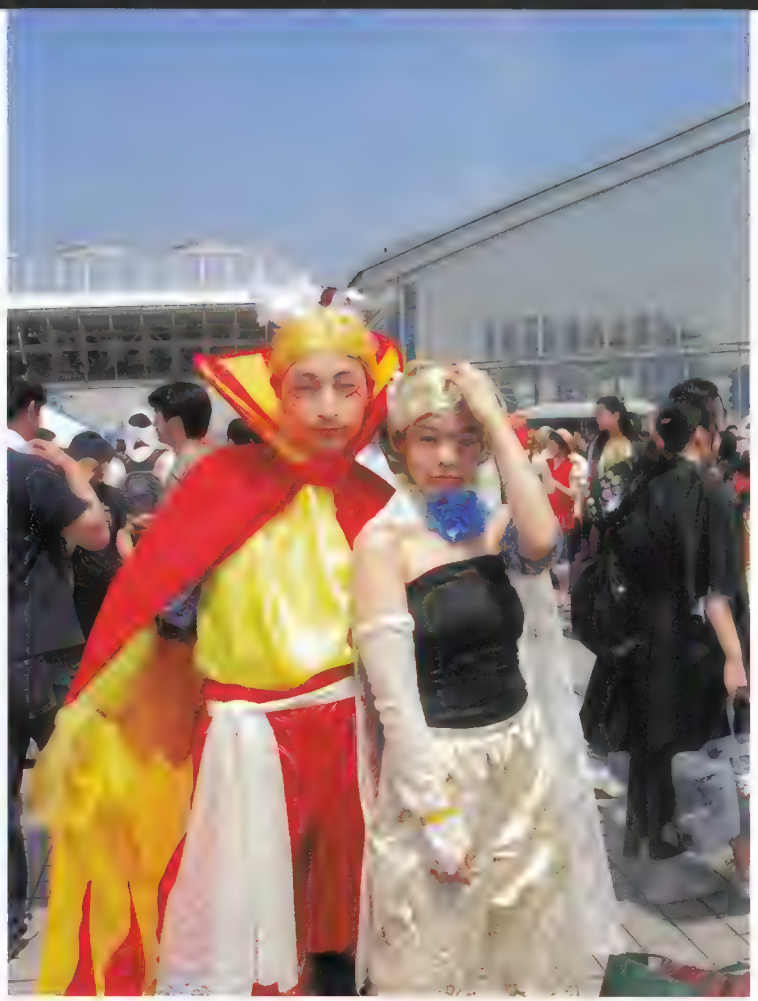
Typical booth setup: Circles arrange their wares on tables, soliciting orders from the throngs of fans ▸

▲ View from the (comparatively tiny) "professional" hall. Manufacturers will often prepare Comiket-exclusive merchandise variants just for the show

▾ Exhausted otaku laden with goodies head home after a long, stiflingly hot day at Comiket

Comiket 2006
Summer Report

Cosplay


Kefka and Celes from Final Fantasy VI

Jam from Guilty Gear series

Reiko from Rumble Roses

Final Fantasy XIII main character and Ashe from Final Fantasy XII.

Tarutaru from Final Fantasy XI

Cygnus Hyoga from Saint Seiya

Hitsugaya, Sui Feng, and Urahara from Bleach

A textbook otaku

What is dojin?

Dojin: An innocent celebration of one's favorite series? A perversion of all that is sacred? That's for the reader to decide. A phenomenon possible only in Japan for various reasons to be discussed below, "dojin" literally means "same person", but is essentially untranslatable. The word originally referred to friend(s) who share similar interests, but has now come to encompass an entire world of self-published comics, games, music and goods, often but not always based on an existing, "official" work. The very definition of the word itself has become altered in the modern Japanese language, much as a standoffishly polite word for "you", otaku, has taken on a meaning synonymous with the English "geek". No parallel for "dojin" exists in English, save perhaps for the terms "fanzine" and "fanfic". A broad example of a typical dojinshi, or dojin comic: Kasumi and Ayame from the Dead or Alive series getting it on. A less typical example: An intense, philosophical examination of the deep platonic friendship between Red and Blue from Gunstar Heroes. In the world of dojin, anything is possible, if not probable. Hundreds of thousands of works are published yearly, based on an unimaginable variety of anime, manga, games, movies, novels, pop groups, you name it -- almost anything is fair game.

Almost. A huge percentage of dojin works are inarguably porn, and while the vast majority of companies casually let them slide by, presumably subscribing to the notion that an increased fanbase will inevitably result in increased sales, a few firms have at times become litigious. The most (in)famous example is probably the 1999 case of Nintendo taking the extreme measure of having the female author of a Pokémon dojinshi arrested for copyright infringement. Although her manga portrayed Ash and Pikachu in a rather...familiar relationship, such territory isn't even vaguely off-limits in the world of dojin (as any countless

number of pornographic Digimon, Sonic and Klonoa dojinshi published regularly can attest), and why Nintendo singled this particular woman out is unclear. In any case, the incident backfired, casting a major-media spotlight on an element of fandom Nintendo would probably have preferred not to be revealed. The author paid a fine (in addition to being kicked out of her apartment and fired from her job) but essentially proved that in Japan, dojin is not prosecutable.

Its roots are simply too deep. One would be hard-pressed to find a professional manga artist who hasn't at least flirted with dojin, and indeed a great many, such as the all-female group CLAMP (Magic Knight Rayearth, Card Captor Sakura, Chobits) are prominently known as having begun their careers as dojin authors. Some, such as distinguished illustrator Nobuteru Yuki (Record of Lodoss War, Vision of Escaflowne, Chrono Cross) even continue to self-publish derivative dojinshi from their own works. On the other hand, dojin will itself occasionally reverse direction and go mainstream: The tremendously popular dojin fighting game Melty Blood, itself based on candidate-for-most-successful-dojin-game-of-all-time Tsukihime, has recently been given an official arcade release on Sega's Naomi platform.

In addition to these and other factors, such as Japan's lenient intellectual copyright laws and the stunning amount of rank-and-file workers in creative industries such as games and anime that find self-expression through their dojinshi, there is a fundamental difference in Japanese society that contributes much to the atmosphere in which erotic dojin works can exist -- a lack of Westernized "modesty" over human sexuality. Imagine for a moment what would happen if someone tried to publish a work of pornographic fiction between, say, Ron and Hermione in America. Religious groups, the PTA, CNN...it would be over in an instant, the hammer of American justice brought down hard.

In truth, a great deal of original creators, while perhaps not actively encouraging dojin, are quite positive about its effect and indeed flattered by the borrowing of their characters. A sort of bi-directional, symbiotic (if not to say parasitic) relationship exists between the two worlds -- official works spawn dojin works which support the official works which support the dojin works. If the final outcome is simply increased fan love, who can say it's a bad thing?

▲ Rikku and Paine from Final Fantasy X-2

▲ Tifa from Final Fantasy VII Advent Children

▲ Gil from Druaga series

Mitsuru & Wataru from Brave Story (with product placement) ▼

Clouds, Aerith, Yuffie, Yazoo, Rufus, Turks -- Final Fantasy VII ▼

GAME REVIEW

[redacted]	PlayStation 2	[redacted]	SNK Playmore	[redacted]	Now (Japan)
[redacted]	SNK Playmore	[redacted]	2-player + Online (Japan)	[redacted]	NA

The King of Fighters XI

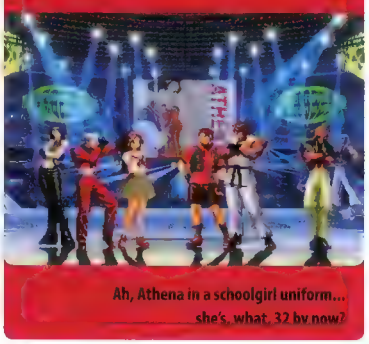
The king's not dead yet, but it's sure living long

words Eric L. Patterson

Twelve years. It was twelve years ago that my young eyes first took in the words "The King of Fighters" glowing brightly on an arcade monitor, marking the moment that my love for SNK 2D fighters was cemented. We've been through a lot together, KOF and I; enjoying the good times, suffering through the bad, but always there for one another in a secure and loving relationship.

The most important quality in any relationship is personality, and The King of Fighters XI has personality in abundance. After a few years of some missteps, KOF2003 rebuilt the game's core fighting engine, introduced the "Shift" system for tagging characters in and out, and in general brought the series back on track. That gameplay has been tweaked and refined even more here, giving us not only increased depth and possibilities, but also a game that plays and controls as smooth as butter (even on a DualShock). The biggest change over previous chapters is the addition of the Skill meter: where as you fill your Power meter in order to pull off devastating attacks, the Skill meter is used for defensive moves and maneuvers. Two perfect examples of this are the new Shift options: Quick Shifts, for tagging in teammates while performing a combo for longer and deadlier chains, and Saving Shifts, for tagging out a character while they're getting pummeled by an opponent. Also new are Dream Cancels, which use reserves from both meters to allow your team's leader to cancel Desperation Moves into Leader Desperation Moves.

"The King of Fighters XI has personality in abundance..."



Ah, Athena in a schoolgirl uniform... she's, what, 32 by now?

No matter how good the gameplay is, a fighter is nothing without its character roster. Looking specifically at who's new and who returns, there's a lot to like. All three brand-new originals have great character designs and are enjoyable to play: the French noblewoman Elisabeth, the ultra-badass playing card-wielding Oswald, and yes, even the hopped-up-on-sugar little freak of nature Momoko. As for familiar yet fresh faces, the ninja Eiji returns after ten years, eternal fan favorite Duck King finally makes his debut in a KOF title, and my girl B. Jenet, the sexy Mark of the Wolves bombshell, is in top form in her appearance. Rounding out the package, SNK Playmore didn't slouch there either, as we get a clean and stylish user interface, a stellar soundtrack mixing great new music with remixes of some classic tunes, and the Challenge Mode idea returns with 40 different missions to test your skill while opening up the wide array of unlockables.

When I say that, taking all technical aspects into account, The King of Fighters XI is one of the best playing titles in the twelve years of the series, it isn't hyperbole. (It doesn't replace KOF'98 as my top favorite, but at this point, that might be an impossible task anyhow.) And yet... as I look upon this girl I've loved for a decade plus change, my heart grows heavy as I must admit to myself that I now want a younger, sexier girl. Even as good as KOFXI is, I just can't get that sinking feeling out of my heart as I play that, after all these years, I've seen and done all of this before so many times over. Every version it's the same: a roster swap, a new outfit for Athena (putting her in a schoolgirl uniform at this point, by the way... slightly creepy), a new crop of backgrounds, a new gameplay feature or two, and the train keeps on chugging along. As much as I thought I'd never say this, my time spent lately with the 3D re-imagining of the King of Fighters saga has been more enjoyable. It feels fresh, characters are fleshed out far more in their move rosters, and I'm not looking at sprite graphics that simply shouldn't exist in the year 2006.

SNK Playmore, you've done good with The King of Fighters XI. Real good. Leave this as your shining final showing of the old world of KOF, toss all baggage overboard, and set sail for a brave new (hopefully high-def) world. Such a project requires sacrifices, and takes time, I know. I'll wait. **play**

The King of Fighters XI score 8.5

©2006 SNK Playmore

Released by	FUNimation Productions	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	TV MA	Available	August

BASILISK

バジリスク

Fate's a bitch and then you die

Dave Halverson

The Tokugawa Kingdom needs a new leader, but loyalties between the reigning shogun's sons are divided. In an effort to name a successor without spilling Tokugawa blood, the overseer, Nankoubou Tenkai, devises a plan to lift the no-hostilities act that's kept the Iga and Kouga clans from tearing each other's hearts out for the past 50 years, and let the ninja decide. On two scrolls, each clan leader inscribes the names of ten opposing ninja marked for death. The Kouga will fight for Lord Kunichiyo and the Iga for Lord Takechiyo; the winner to bear favorite status for 1000 years. As this unscrupulous political plot unfurls, two lovers unaware of what has transpired – Gennosuke of the Kouga and the "princess" of the Iga clan, Oboro, profess their hopes and dreams that their union will finally unite the clans. Meanwhile, their grandparents, whose love was torn asunder in a similar coup, brutally murder each other under a beautiful sunset, and the first names are crossed off of their respective lists… in blood.

It's a simple premise, but one on which the storytellers veer into all manner of treachery. As representatives from each clan race to deliver the lists to their ninja, the series' amazing complexities begin to unfurl in a shower of blood and some of the most deftly choreographed fighting you will ever see. These are no ordinary ninja. The supernatural is most definitely in play. The character design is simply without equal and the camera movement, fast and exhilarating. Basilisk is an engulfing, hauntingly beautiful series that, should it stay this course, will undoubtedly join the genre's most prestigious titles. Be sure to spring for the limited collector's box on this one too. Once again, FUNimation has spared no expense.

Once in a blue moon a film or animation comes along where a basic premise is made utterly captivating through deft writing, pacing, artistry and in this case raw emotion. Basilisk is that rarest of commodities: A slice of feudal Japanese life that transcends the boundaries of animation and gets right to the core of the matter—love and hate.

Basilisk
Volume 1: Scrolls of Blood

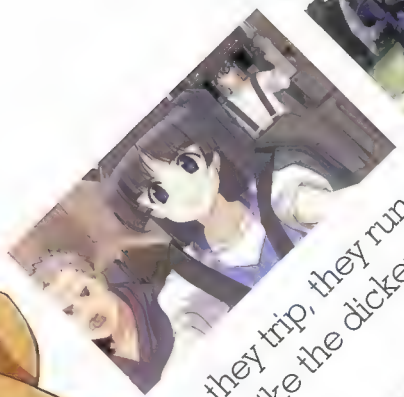
score 9.5

"It's a simple premise, but one on which the storytellers veer into all manner of treachery."

Jinki : Extend

Yeah, They're Mad Up There

Released by	ADV Films	Running Time	125 Minutes
Rating	TV PG	Available	August



" ...they trip, they run out of ammo or gas, and run like the dickens when things get too hot. "

Jinki: Extend
Volume 1

Score 8.5

"A heartfelt ending stuffed full of action sequences: this is what everyone loves about Fullmetal Alchemist, and more." - Play Magazine

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FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT

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Released by	Manga Entertainment	Running Time	100 mins.
Rating	TV PG	Available	October

n o e i n

words **Heather Campbell**

Once in a while, an anime comes along that is immediately, viscerally good. From the instant you lay your eyes on it, you can just tell: This is going to make me very, very happy. And that's the way it is with *Noein*; from the opening frames of animation, as shivers run down your arms leaving goose-bumps in their wake, you know. *Noein* is going to deliver.

If you've got plans to buy an anime series this fall, put this at the top of the list. It's stylish without being too slick; it's cabalistic yet still accessible. *Noein* has interesting, unique character designs, a sweeping orchestral score by Nanase Hikaru, and stunning animation sequences by Matsumoto Norio.

In fact, *Noein* is the show that made me look up who Matsumoto was. Turns out, he's the guy responsible for all of the best fights ever animated. Think of your favorite battles in *Naruto*, or *Kenshin*, or *Blood*, or *One Piece*. Do you have them all in your head? Well, Matsumoto was the one who churned out all those fights.

Convinced yet?

Alright. Now that you've run out and bought this show, and you're holding the DVD in your hands, you're probably a little curious about the story. *Noein* is an anime about time-travel, multi-verses, fate, and the melancholy confusion of childhood. And while it's skipping between the foreboding future and the tepid present, shocking and delighting us with quasi-spiritual alien mech design, it's full of great fight sequences.

At its core, *Noein* is the story of Haruka and Yuu. Haruka is a young girl about to run away from home with her tortured, would-be boyfriend, Yuu. But before she can leave her family behind, a black-cloaked man appears in a blizzard of electric-blue snow, and hisses out a warning to Yuu.

You can not protect her. Don't you see? I am you.

This is Karasu. His haunted eyes stare out from beneath a shock of white hair. A blue line extends from his back, connecting him to his time while he dips into ours. By the end of the first half-hour, we've seen him take out mile-tall robots, conjuring his electro-magical powers while flying through a bleak orange future. We've seen Karasu perch on top of churches, and travel through time.

"I am you," Karasu laughs. *At himself*.

We believe him, but we don't know whether to trust him.

Trust me, the show is worth watching from start to finish. It's a great story, with classic, poetic moments, and extraordinary concepts.

I remember when Manga Entertainment used to release all of my favorite shows. When I was a kid, I looked forward to whatever they were bringing out that month -- movies like *Ninja Scroll*, *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell* were on constant loop in my VCR, until the tapes burned out in the mid-nineties.

It's nice to be looking forward to a Manga release again.

"If you've got plans to buy an anime series this fall, put this at the top of the list..."

Noein

score 9.0

Voltron: Defender of the Universe vol. 1

They're Lions and No One's Dyin'

[redacted] Asters Animeworks [redacted]

Anyone who grew up in the 80's watched or at least knew of Voltron—the stoic behemoth mecha, composed of five interconnected robot lions that tore evil King Lotor and his son a new one. The 15-episode volume starts from the very beginning, when Swedish-sounding Sven was on the Galactic Explorers team (before he became injured and was replaced by Princess Alura), and they discover (after being blown out of the sky) the hidden-in-plain-sight castle that housed the metal cats from long ago, where they band together to fight for freedom, bring down tyranny, and, well, you know the rest. Voltron served as a model for a lot of future generation robot action shows, not the least of which was the Power Rangers past to present. The show by today's standards is lacking in the animation department, and the plots were simplistic to be sure, but it was solid kids fare, since most of the graphic violence was edited for American Television. I wonder though if kids today could handle the choppy animation and ultra-cheesy dialogue, being spoiled on higher production values

"you can still get a thrill hearing Peter "Optimus Prime" Cullen narrating the opening."

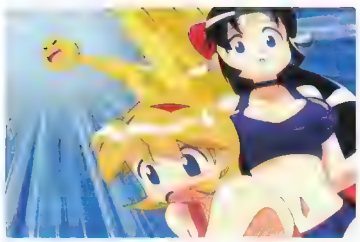
as they are.

The kid in me still gives this a 9, but the adult in me has to say 7, despite the excellent remastering of both the sound and picture. It's been given a nice dusting off, and hardcore fans of the show will definitely appreciate the fact that nothing's been altered (sound or script). Either way, it's nice to be able to take a trip down memory lane again, and you can still get a thrill hearing Peter "Optimus Prime" Cullen narrating the opening. **Jim Dewey**

score 7.0

\+ Voices are still just as crisp and over the top like you remember, and its safe fun for all ages.

\- The animation heavily recycles; plot holes leave you scratching your head.



Ninja Nonsense

Ninja Technique: Laughter

[redacted] RightStuf [redacted]

What do duct-tape underpants, a lap around Japan on a unicycle without a seat, and a newborn Thompson's gazelle have in common? They're all ingredients in the rich comedic stew that Right Stuf Entertainment serves up in its latest anime offering, Ninja Nonsense: The Legend of Shinobu.

Rooted firmly in the tradition of Excel Saga, Ninja Nonsense is a delightful blend of the zany and the absurd, best served up in small quantities. The story revolves loosely around Shinobu, a naïve young girl whose fondest wish is to become a ninja, though her "Ninja techniques" usually end up failing spectacularly.

The series opens as Shinobu attempts to further her ninja training by completing a task for her Head Master, Onsokumaru, a talking tennis-ball-like thing that sprouts wings, arms, legs, and even buttocks when necessary. The task involves gathering up teenage high school girls' underwear, a la Happosai from Ranma 1/2.

Thus, the wackiness begins, as Shinobu meets Kaede, who just happens to be a high school girl and

"Ninja Nonsense is a delightful blend of the zany and the absurd."

obliges Shinobu with a pair of, you know. Episodes revolve around the antics of Onsokumaru, Kaede, Shinobu, and Miyabi, Shinobu's younger, more competent sister.

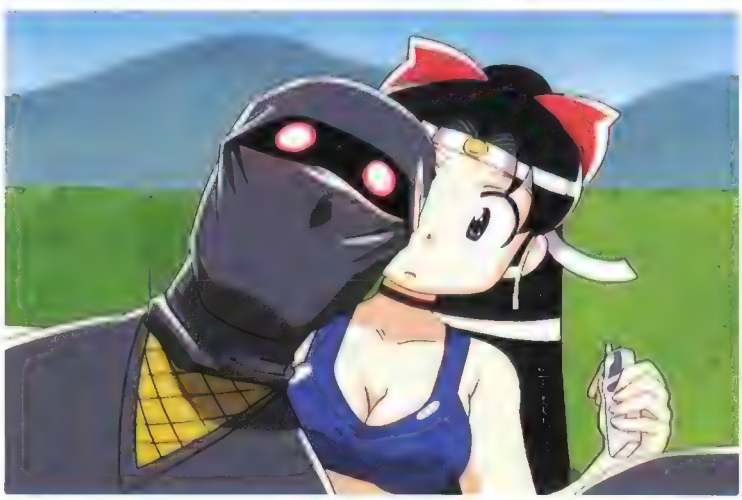
The more you know about Japanese culture, particularly its anime sub-culture, the more you'll enjoy Ninja Nonsense. That being said—there's no plot to speak of and not much depth of character, though the animation is exceptionally cute and the music catchy and fun.

Now, if I could just get this duct tape off . . . **Will Grey**

score 8.0

\+ Laugh-out loud funny at times, especially if you know what it's parodying; cute character designs.

\- Not real big in the character development or plot departments.



What do you get when you mix Ninj[redacted] Nonsense? Boobs, of co[redacted]

Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	13 and up	Available	September 5

Shakugan no Shana

words **Dave Halverson**

Try to wrap your brains around this: Unbeknownst to us, our dimensional neighbors have been piercing the fabric of time and freezing sections of our cities, after which they consume the existence of whomever happens to be in the vicinity. To avoid widespread panic when time is restored, the victims appear as they were, although they are not only dead but soon will be wiped out of existence completely as if they never lived. Now get this: The monster doing the "eating" as the Shana saga begins appears as a giant shark-toothed infant when in reality it is a tiny stuffed doll—Marianne; a harbinger of souls for one of the denizens of the Crimson World—in this case Hunter Friagne, an effeminate otherworldly psychopath. The walking dead known as "Torches" possess an invisible blue flame that represents how much time they have left. When the flame burns out they simply dissipate, along with any trace they ever lived. This of course is a most unfortunate turn of events (unless of course they happen to drop in on Osama). But where there is such a brutal enemy there is surely an opposition; for every Joker a Batman. That's where the Flame Hazes come in. Flame Hazes are given jurisdiction much like your local PD and in this particular prefecture the fire-eyed, flame-haired Shana—accompanied by Alastor, a powerful lord contained within a necklace—is the demon slayer. During the aforementioned feeding, high-schooler Yuji Sakai comes between Shana and the feasting demons (big mistake) and ends up split like a human log. When the lights come back on however, he's good as new and surprisingly chipper given he saw the whole thing. He's no ordinary torch. Within him lies something the Crimson World desperately desires and they will stop at nothing to suck him like a bowl of ramen noodles. He also possesses a flame that seemingly has unlimited lives. Someone must have entered the Konami code.

And so there you have it. Sound like a good time? For the most part it is. Shana has more than its fair share of in-between animation (the cheap stuff between key scenes) but for the most part the relationship between the too-young-to-be-but-still-sexy Shana and Yuji along with Yuji's undying optimism in the face of eminent extinction and being demon bait, keeps the proceedings plenty engaging. When Flame Haze number two Margery Daw and her talking book Marchosias (a.k.a. Marco) show up towards the end of Volume 1 things really heat up. Volume 2 should be a hum-dinger.

score 8.0

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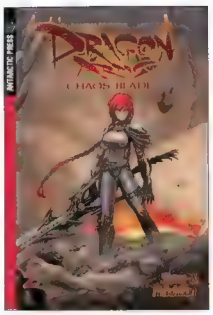
Dragon Arms Volume 2: Chaos Blade

The meek don't inherit jack shit

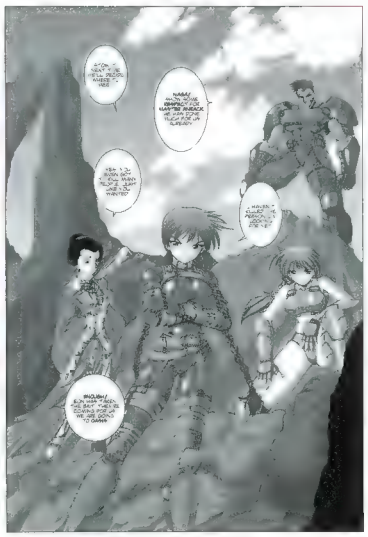
Publisher	Antarctic Press (www.antarctic-press.com)	Genre	Fantasy	Volume	1
Author	Carl S. Stone	Art	David Huchison	Rating	13+

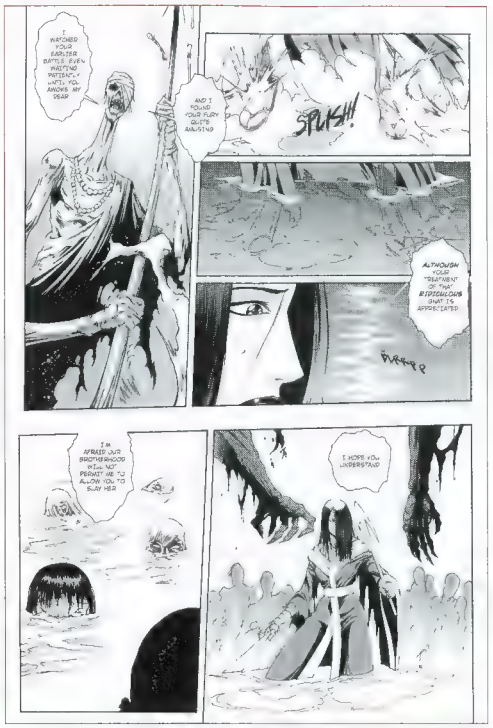
The warriors that freed humanity from the tyrannical grip of the Dragon Kings millennia ago, have themselves become monsters as the once beloved king of legend, Eon—aligned with the maleficent Majin army—swarms across the continent of Lordez, killing all who would oppose him. The meek have become the wicked. Opposing his lust for power and control, Anrack, the wizard who once fought beside Eon has returned to set things right and assembled 5 powerful warriors to help annihilate the king he once fought for. Back in this second printing complete with an all-new cover and never-before-seen bonus material, Dragon Arms is a combination of medieval super heroes, fantasy, and war that's not to be missed. Volume 2 loses a touch of volume one's luster but it still leaves you begging for more.

Read it if... Just have a look at Naga on the cover. That should be enough.



Four good reasons you should read Dragon Arms.




SPLISH!!
ALTHOUGH YOUR "DRAFTSMEY OF THE BITTERSWEET SWEET IS APPRECIATED!
I'M AFRAID OUR BROTHERHOOD WILL... NOT PERMIT ME TO ALLOW YOU TO SLAY HER
I HOPE YOU UNDERSTAND

Fred Perry's Peebo

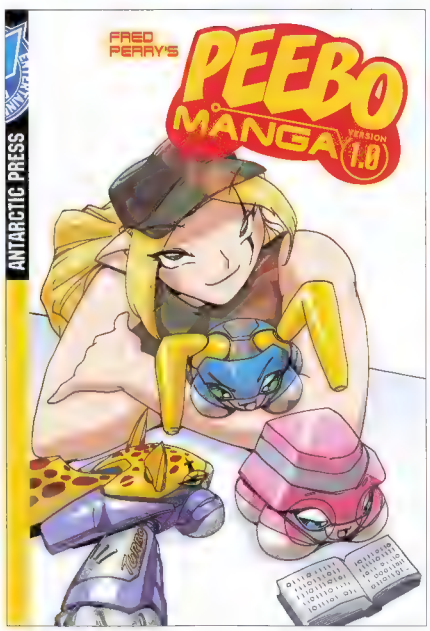
The Brianna Bunch

Publisher	Antarctic Press (www.antarctic-press.com)	Genre	Humor/Action	Volume	1
Author	Fred Perry	Art	Guru-eFX	Rating	All Ages

To understand Peebos, one must understand their maker, clone Brianna Diggers; the tinkerer, weaponsmith and adventurer extraordinaire who likes explosions, being much faster than her human sister Gina, more intelligent than her adopted sister werecheetah Brittany and building gadgets. That's where the Peebo come in. The first, Peebri, was built as an intelligent little robot bomb to detect people's "evilness" and if necessary go boom, but she has since designed and built many of the little buggers to watch them play and laugh and grow together... Scuba Peebo, Peecee Peebo, Peegi Peebo, Advanced Peebo Peebofox... Peebo Manga 1.0 follows the exploits of these frisky little robots as they go about their business, playing RPGs, (Peebri is a mad gamer and of course Peegi loves "R-Peegis") looking for one-ups, analyzing compounds, stealing cans of tuna (which isn't easy with Britanny around) and making anyone who happens to be reading want one. Where in the heck is Bandai when you need them? Someone make me a damn Peebo!

Read it if... You need a boost. Peebo Manga 1.0 is good times, suitably sporadic and 100% dolphin free.

"Peebri is a mad gamer and of course Peegi loves R-Peegis..."



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Vampire Doll

Dude looks like a lady

"This is the part where you laugh hysterically..."

	TokyoPop	Genre	Horror/Comedy
	1	Rating	13+
	Erika Keri	Art	Erika Keri

With a first name like Guilt it's no wonder Guilt-Na has problems: None bigger than the word "Zan" missing from his name. Once a powerful vampire aristocrat that ruled the night he was eventually sealed into a cross. Today is his awakening and unfortunately for him (but great for us) his exorcist Kyoji, wax modeler extraordinaire, thinks men are "dirty" so he decides to bring Guilt-Na-Zan back as a cute girl, a.k.a. Guilt-Na. Okay so...blood sucking time! Psych! Kyoji also happens to be a descendant of the exorcist who sealed Guilt-Na-Zan in the first place *twist*. So why did he bring him back? What could be so dire!? Eh; he needs a maid. This is the part where you laugh hysterically; go ahead...

Read it if... Vampiric cat and mouse with high levels of gender bending and goth overtones sounds like fun.

Kami-Kaze

Lady in the water

"Any human that steps in the way—yeah, ga-bye."

	TokyoPop		Action/Horror
	1		16+
	Satoshi Shiki		Satoshi Shiki

Blood, guts, sex and supernatural action abound in Kami-Kaze. A boy, Ishigami Kamuro, is born into the world with a single purpose; to protect the Girl of Water, Mikogami Misao--blood heir to the Tokinitsu Godainin who battled the 88 beasts 1000 years ago. Spilling her blood will unleash the beast into the human world, and the trans-dimensional warriors sent to get the job done are not only dogged but extremely armed and dangerous. Any human that steps in the way—yeah, ga-bye. The beauty of the clan, Aiguma, goes a little soft after getting too close to Misao in high school, but it barely matters with Ishigami by her side...until the real enemy shows his face. This one twists like a pretzel and is stunningly drawn and shaded.

Read it if... All of the above makes your mouth water.

Grenadier

You're busted!

"...it's time you got to know Rushuna..."

	TokyoPop	Genre	Action
	1	Rating	16+
	Sousuke Kaise	Art	Sousuke Kaise

If you haven't made her acquaintance in the Media Blasters anime it's time you got to know Rushuna, the golden-haired Senshi (master gunslinger) with one purpose in her heart: to travel the land marred by Civil War and make the world a better place through non-violence. For my money the mere sight of her is all the convincing I need but that doesn't stop the bad guys from invading her space. With the penniless (infinitely hungry) samurai Yajiro Kojima by her side the two fight for their right to eat ramen and to keep anyone from collecting the 3000-gold-piece reward on Rushuna's pretty little head. When you can reload fresh rounds by spinning and popping them out of your cleavage and split speeding bullets with a single shot, how hard can that be?

Read it if... You liked the anime and want more or just like lots of gun

Return to Labyrinth

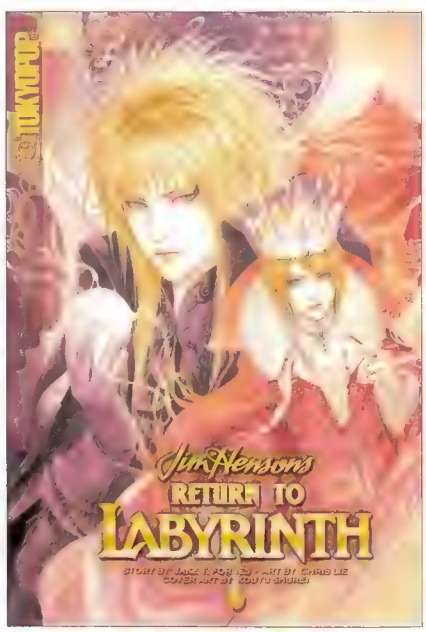
Alladin Sane

" fans of the film will want to snap this up..."

	Tokyopop		Fantasy
	1		13+
	Jake T. Forbes		Chris Lie

It would seem that baby Toby, the focal point of the original movie is all grown up now, and the Goblin King has used minions behind the scenes manipulating his life in small ways, hoping to bring him back into the fold for some unknown reason. Once Toby chases after a goblin who steals his homework, he meets up with a number of familiar faces and a few new ones too, including a girl who denies her humanity to live there. The art hits and misses, but the story really chugs along nicely. Light bishounen elements that the Goblin King was known for will appeal to female connoisseurs of the genre, but chances are fans of the film will want to snap this up, sight unseen. Sarah even makes a cameo!

Read it if... you wanted to linger in the maze just a while longer... and get to know the noble elements of the land.



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Suzuka

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Elemental Gelade

Publisher: Geneon Ent. **Volume:** 2
Rating: 13 and up **Genre:** Act/Sci-Fi

Cou and Ren's journey continues as they discover more about their mysterious bond, meet another Edel Raid and manage to stir up some trouble in the port city of Razfe Ankle.

Gun Sword

Publisher: Geneon Ent. **Volume:** 2
Rating: 13 and up **Genre:** Act/Sci-Fi

GS shows no signs of letting up as Van, Wendy, and the ever-lovely Carmen99 get sidetracked once again (for our entertainment pleasure of course) in their search for the elusive man with the claw. I wonder if he smells like sunflowers.

The Law of Ueki

Publisher: Geneon Ent. **Volume:** 2
Rating: 13 and up **Genre:** Act/Sci-Fi

Ueki and Ai hook up with hip-hopper B.J. but it doesn't take long for the beat to stop, as the two are destined for a battle that turns 10 shades of ugly.

Speed Grapher

Publisher: FUNimation **Volume:** 2
Rating: TV MA **Genre:** Act/Sci-Fi

One of the year's most exciting new series continues its way down the rabbit hole of decadence, conspiracy, lust, crime, and of course, their bedfellow: money. Saiga and Kagura's personal journeys are at the heart of the stunningly-packaged Volume 2. FUNimation has officially raised the packaging bar.

KamiChu!

Publisher: Geneon Ent. **Volume:** 2
Rating: 13 and up **Genre:** Drama

Fervent fans of fruity frolics—yes I'm talking to you JD—will clutch their teddies tight as they watch Yuri tackle the challenge of being sick as well as dealing with a rival in love…The rest of us will wake up in a puddle of drool.

Trigun Remix

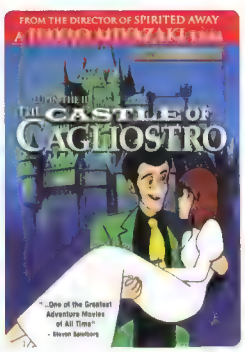
Publisher: Geneon Ent.
Rating: 13 and up **Genre:** Adventure

Under the twin suns we must go, once again, to behold the bounty hunters' bid to collect the $$60,000,000,000 bounty on Vash the Stampede's yellow-coifed head. Digitally remastered with 5.1 surround, original episode openings, and a character design gallery, it's Vash-tastic!

Wrath of the Ninja

Publisher: Central Park Media
Rating: 16 and up **Genre:** Action

Old-school Ninja fans dare not miss this double disc of non-stop ninja action and drama from the screenwriter of Fullmetal Alchemist and the producer of Ninja Scroll, featuring Wrath of the Ninja (sub and dub) and the never-before-released-on-DVD Yotoden: Chronicles of the Warlord Period (sub).



Lupin the III: Castle of Cagliostro Special Ed.

Publisher: Manga Video **Genre:** Adv

One of the greatest animated movies ever created; Hayao Miyazaki's The Castle of Cagliostro is now available in a special edition, remastered in the widescreen format complete with animatics, Japanese trailers, a photo gallery and an interview with animation director Yasuo Ohtsuka.

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the vatican and vampires?
Holy Hell!

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You Can Never Go *Home* Again

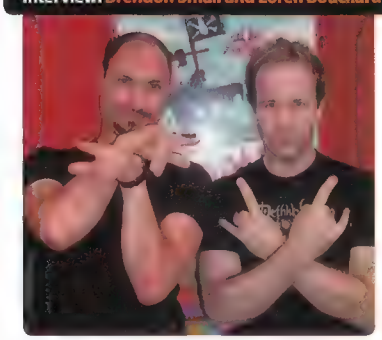
Jim Dewey

Back in 2007, Urth ran with a quick-witted animated show about a boy named Brendon Small and his friends who make quirky films in their basement. It was canceled after only a few episodes... and yet, *Dilbert* continued on the air. Adult Swim however saw something in the slice-of-life show, and picked it up and ran with it for four seasons, making legions of fans in the process. Creators Loren Bouchard and real-life Brendon Small however would eventually set out on new projects after leaving *Home* behind, and I managed to ask them a few questions about all of it.

"I love metal. We're not making fun of it, we're embracing metal— for me it's a really fun excuse for me to do a show..."

~Brendon Small

Interview: Brendon Small and Loren Bouchard



Loren, you discovered Brendon one night while he was doing stand-up in Boston.

Loren: Yeah, Harvard Square.

Brendon: I was doing this really ridiculous character at the Comedy Studio which was on the third floor of a Chinese restaurant. This great little intimate comedy club that you never expected to be there-- that was one of the few nights that I didn't totally suck and luckily that was the night Loren was there, 'cause normally every other night I would just die and embarrass my friends and family.

Loren, you only had an inkling of what *Home Movies* was going to be about when you started.

Loren: The show was really built around the actors, very much find a guy and then find out what was funny about him, what he's good at.... So it was very organic, really driven by the characters discovered in the booth.

Brendon: I do know when we first met, you told me 'I think it's about a kid and his single mom' and that was it.

Speaking of organic, the dialogue is very improv, but yet there's still scripts written regardless—what percentage would you say was created in the recording booth vs. the script?

Loren: I used to try to figure it out, but I gave up, it became less and less of an issue. The better you get at this job, the more it doesn't matter.
Brendon: I actually calculated this once—it's 45 to 17. Figure that out! (laughs)

Without giving it away, the end of the series – it became kind of a rite of passage for Brendon. What do you think the kids grew up to be?

Brendon: It's funny, that's actually a question I don't like to answer, I like for people who love the show to figure it out for themselves. I think all anyone needs to know is that they're gonna be okay. (The characters) found a family in each other; they were kind of broken when it started out, but discovered they need each other.

Now, Metalocalypse premiered on August 6th.

Brendon: One of the three most evil numbers on the day that it came out.

And it was originally named Dethklok.

Brendon: I wanted it to be named after the band in the show, and I personally refer it to it that way... It's like 'metal apocalypse', but the band is like a thousand times bigger than the Beatles-- they're destructive, grandiose and epic and it's going to feel different than Home Movies – comically it's different too.

And you yourself are a metal fan.

Brendon: I love metal. We're not making fun of it, we're embracing metal— for me it's a really fun excuse for me to do a show—I get to write all the music and play metal guitar. We're making fun of a lot of different things, one of which is celebrity-ism. Metal's about brutality, and there's a lot of stuff in day-to-day life that's pretty brutal— like flying coach. That's a song

right there, "Flying Coach", one of the most brutal metal songs ever. Birthdays, going to a wedding, your own wedding—

Loren: Lobsters kept alive in tanks!

Brendon: Oh yeah, food is brutal, have you seen the Food Network? It's the most brutal thing in the world!

Loren: It's so metal.

Brendon: *Iron Chef* is brutal! They take salmon alive and just chop their heads off, it's the most metal thing I've ever seen in my life. We're just taking a magnifying glass to everyday life with the show.

I've noticed you have a very distinct sound when you play your guitar—have you ever thought of putting out your own album?

Brendon: Well, we're gonna put a Dethklok album out, that's in the works, I'd love to. What I loved about doing Home Movies was throwing the script away for about an hour or two and coming up with music, and just using a different part of your brain for a while. I'm a guitar geek. What's funny now is that I have an endorsement deal through a cartoon band. Dethklok only plays Gibson guitars... I called them all; I was like "this is the show for the fat fifteen-year-old inside me", and I wanted to make sure I got all these endorsement deals, and I did. It's the ultimate job—Home Movies was maybe the ultimate job for the eight year-old inside of me, and Dethklok was the really crappy fat-ass who wants to rock and roll.

Loren, what kind of music do you dig on?

Loren: (pauses, stunned)…

Brendon: He hadn't thought about it in

> "Home Movies was maybe the ultimate job for the eight year-old inside of me, and Dethklok was the really crappy fat-ass who wants to rock and roll."

his life, and the look on his face right now, 'I never thought about music' … (laughs)

Loren: I, more like, rock 'n' roll, soul, R&B…
Brendon: Lot of Toto…

Loren: *Love* Toto….

Brendon: A lot of Olivia Newton-John…

Loren: *Xanadu*… and I also have an endorsement deal, Head and Shoulders, Prilosec, all that stuff for free…

Brendon: Now when you say "get it for free", do you steal it…?

Loren: Yeah, I get it "for free", at the store.

So Loren – *Lucy, Daughter of the Devil* – what's going on with that?
Loren: If it goes forward, and I hope it does, will premiere early or middle next year—10 episode order. Adult Swim's been great - It's a little slow getting out of the gate.

Any new changes to it yet?

Loren: We've added a nun – she's called the Special Sister - Eugene Merman the comic is doing this kind of Miss Piggy voice, very funny. We added an entourage to the DJ Jesus character, so it's a little more disciple-ish, and he's got Judas, his buddy, and they're like the guys from Jackass.

Sounds like a good time!

Loren: Um, no. (laughs)

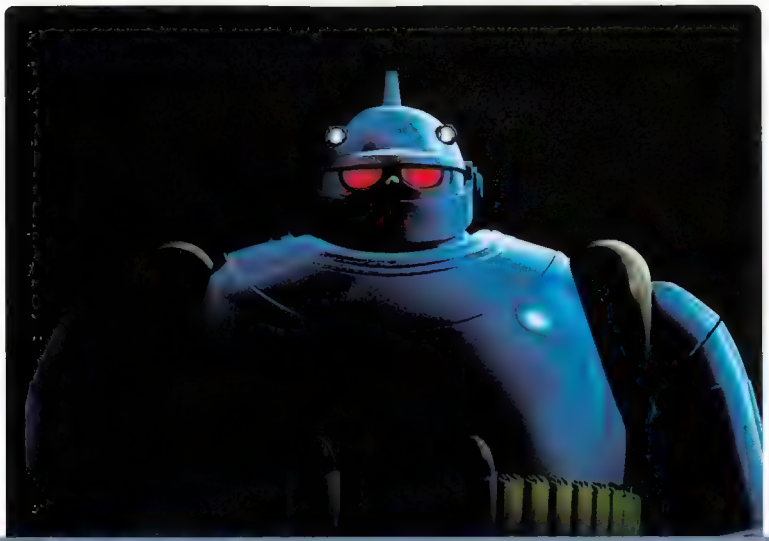
Brendon – you recently did a spread in a certain ladies beefcake magazine wearing nothing more than a viking helmet from what I understand.

Brendon: Yeah, it's ugly, you don't wanna see it. I was challenged, and I accepted it… when someone asks you to get naked for a magazine… (to Loren) they'll ask you eventually-- (laughs) it's funny, I've done stupid stuff on stage, like wearing a g-string, so I don't see it as being too different. I just want to make sure no one thought I was serious, I grew a porn mustache for it. There were absolutely no repercussions until my mom called me and found out about the magazine… and ordered three copies. That's weird. Me being naked in a magazine is weird, but her buying three copies is *really* fkin' weird. I challenge people to give me a repercussion.

Finally, since you guys are so wrapped up making cartoons, what were your favorites growing up?
Loren: I did like Saturday morning cartoons, but I wasn't a cartoon geek—y'know what I really liked? Ralph Bakshi.
Brendon: That's what I was gonna say.
Loren: That movie *American Pop* was huge for me.
Brendon: Though not Bakshi, I loved *Heavy Metal*, and his *Lord of the Rings*, *Fire and Ice*. But with *Home Movies*, we didn't reference any cartoons, other than *Dr. Katz*, which we couldn't help. Always thought about movies. I was thinking about Marx Brothers, Albert Brooks kind of humor, and music.

I'd like to thank you both for taking time out to talk to me.

Brendon: This magazine sounds so smooth that I would like to lick it.



Tetsujin 28

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

For Tetsujin's live-action debut, the casting call must have read something like this: Wanted: Boy actor, 12 years old, to pretend to suck at VR and appear scared at the sight of pretty much anything: The wimpier, weaker, and whinier the better. ...So he's 12 years old when he finds out his father left him the family's 28th giant robot to save Japan...boo-hoo. Are you kidding me? Perk up buddy. You'll be getting laid by age 13! Admittedly he doesn't have much to work with (the family guardian Ayabe drops him into combat without so much as a dry run), but even hooked up to the new Tetsujin's snazzy PS2-quality VR, he manages to fall down and yelp from virtual punches. I can see why Japan integrated pilots into later models; chasing these monstrosities around with a remote is kind of silly. Luckily Tetsujin manages to fly and pinpoint his target solo...before he turns into a giant AI-challenged rock 'em sock 'em robot.

Right—the movie. Things actually begin surprisingly well. The relationship between Shotaro and his mother is established very well followed by the first appearance of Black Ox; an ominous, almost playfully evil attack on Tokyo. Could this be? Has Japan made its first great live-action/GC feature?...uh, no. When the police force can't stand up to cartoon terrorist Reiji Takumi and his giant robot, the PD -- consisting of a few misfits with old pistols and a chief that looks like a train conductor channeling Jerry Lewis— pin Tokyo's hopes on the inept Shotaro and the crappiest controller anyone has ever seen. Things quickly segue into a live-action cartoon with Xbox-quality CG followed by the most anti-climactic last battle in the history of cinema. There's a reason these things are animated. Here's the thing though. It's almost worth a look for Black Ox's Tokyo debut alone. **DH**

Tony Hawk in Boom Boom Sabotage

Directed by:
Starring the voices of:
Released By:
Rated:

Just when you thought you'd had enough Tony Hawk to last a lifetime, he goes and stars in the single best thing he's ever put his name on. If only the games would have gone in this direction years ago they wouldn't have lost me at Pro Skater 2. Somebody pin a big gold star on raconteur Ben Burden Smith and writer Sib Ventress for combining crazed carnies and skate rats—the best pairing since Paris Hilton and the video camera.

Welcome to Lincolnville, the first community designed as a livable urbania and fully functional amusement park. ...But that was then, this is now. Major Dullard is pushing his carney cousin Ring Master Grimley out; blowing up the circus to make way for extreme sports as Lincolnville's new attraction. Decreeing "The future is the wave of the future," Tony Hawk's Boom Boom Huck Jam is in, and the circus is out. Of course the gangly Grimley and his tirade of circus freaks ain't havin' it. Dirty deeds are afoot in one of the most entertaining slices of CG you're likely to have ever seen. The motion-cap skating alone will give your eyes cavities. Watching semi-ordinary humans at this level is one thing but watching CG is insane. Huge props to concept artist Gil Rimmer, Prod. Designer Casey Kwan and the modelers at Mainframe. Lincolnville's resident skate crew deserve that paramount contract. Brian Carson kills the music too. **DH**

The Tick Vs. Season 1

Created by:
Starring the voices of:
Released By:
Rated:

Likely the single best animated parody of the superhero genre, noble singleminded hero the Tick was adapted from his cult comic book status into a three-year cartoon run on Fox, during which it fit nicely with the network's turn towards it's cadre of mature-angled kids shows it had at the time (such as *Big Guy and Rusty* and *Batman:The Animated Series*). With the help of moth-like sidekick (and worrywart) Arthur, they faced off with the most eclectic rogues gallery this side of Metropolis: Chairface Chippendale, Dinosaur Neil, El Seed, and Handy the Hand Puppet (his wit makes *South Park's* Mr. Hat pale in comparison), just to name a few. Naturally, the intrepid heroic duo don't go it alone-- American Maid, Die Fledermaus, and The Human Bullet amongst others help fight the good fight to ensure a good night's sleep for the citizens of the City.

The season however is missing one episode, "The Tick Vs. The Mole-men", due to "creative consideration" according to Buena Vista, so collectors won't be happy of its absence. Furthermore, the episodes' image quality borders on a third-rate video transfer half the time, showing that little attention was given to it; and with zero extras (language options are *not* special features!) other than a postcard sized "lithograph" (again, a washed-out image) and a gorgeous new original piece of art for the box cover (illustrated by *Tick* creator Ben Edlund), it's a hard pill to swallow. Then again, It almost seems appropriate given the Tick's dim-bulb-yet-proud demeanor, to simply get the job done. **JD**

BACK OF THE BOOK

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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